

Lay Presidency – A journey that resulted in a deeper personal understanding on eucharistic, ministerial and ecclesiological theologies.

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Introduction

Initially I viewed the whole matter of Lay Presidency at the Eucharistic as an ultra-conservative, protestant challenge from the Diocese of Sydney which could be ignored. However, as the matter was brought up again in 2007 just as the conservative and liberal wings of the Anglican Communion seemed to be drawing up battle-lines I decided to give it a bit more attention. This was mainly because if I was claiming that Scriptural references to women priests, divorce and remarriage as well as human sexual orientation needed to be re-interpreted in a more updated way, why was I drawing a line in the sand over lay presidency – surely it too might need to be re-interpreted in light of the 21st Century needs of the Church?

As I did some reading about Lay presidency, mainly – if not exclusively - from reports and papers available on the Internet, I realised that these papers were not going to be impartial presentation of facts but were inevitably heavily biased according to the writers churchmanship – Anglo-Catholic or Evangelical. Furthermore some presented very legalistic arguments – more concerned that they would or would not be breaking Canon Law than worrying about theological proofs for or against. The theological proofs they took as being given in their favour anyway and thus did not need to be discussed or justified.

What I hope to cover in this paper is to define what is meant by Lay Presidency, why the issue has arisen now, its ramification on the theology of Eucharist, the theology of the priesthood, the theology of ecclesiology and on ecumenical relations between Anglicans and other denominations.

I will present Eucharistic Presidency in its scriptural, early and medieval church contexts. With the reformation I will try to present the Anglican understanding of the Eucharist, which will automatically impact on Anglican understanding of priesthood and understanding of church. Finally I will give what the future might hold on this question of Lay Presidency.

Definition

Even defining “Lay Presidency” is complex. In a book issued in 1997 by the House of Bishops of The General Synod of the Church of England, *Eucharistic Presidency* it is defined as “the overseeing of the entire eucharistic celebration by any person who is not an episcopally ordained priest” (House of Bishops, 1997: 5). This sort of definition can lead to complications in ecumenical relationships (see below). Wikipedia has the following definition under the article on Lay Presidency “Lay presidency is a form of celebrating the Eucharist whereby the person presiding over the sacrament is not an ordained minister of religion. Most independent Christian churches have a form of lay presidency as part of their communal worship. Mainstream denominations have been less inclined to allow lay people to preside over the sacrament, preferring to use ordained ministers or priests for this role. (www.Wikipedia.com “Lay Presidency”).

The use of the word “lay” which in this case to mean non-clerical is also incorrect as “lay” is derived from *Laos* the whole people of God. “Presidency” also brings up problems as more and more parts in the Eucharist liturgy are distributed to lay people or to the congregation as a whole. But I will continue to use the term Lay Presidency to mean the definition given it by the House of Bishops above.

Why this issue has arisen

Why has the question of lay presidency arisen in the first place? Is it an ongoing argument within the church since its early days or is it merely one section of the diverse Anglican Communion attempting to score points off another – in other words, a disagreement over different

churchmanship? Or is it a real practical matter especially for Anglican Dioceses that are small, widespread and cash strapped, unable to pay fulltime ordained clerics?

All these arguments have been used for and against lay presidency, each side accusing the other of misunderstanding the point and pushing its own understanding of eucharist, priesthood and church.

The Anglican Province of the Southern Cone decided to develop a creative pattern of ministry in order to minister across a vast geographic area. This new pattern would include licensing deacons and lay people to preside at the Eucharist. This idea was rejected by a narrow margin (8 votes to 7) as it was not felt right that the Southern Cone should act unilaterally without the consent of the rest of the Anglican Communion.

The Province of New South Wales, Australia is a province dominated by the Diocese of Sydney, described by Dr Martin Davie as “the most radically protestant diocese in the Communion.” (Davie, 2005: point 6.4.27). It decided to introduce Diaconal presidency in preference to extended communion¹. In 1997 an ordinance to authorise lay and diaconal presidency was passed by the Synod but Archbishop Harry Goodhew refused his assent and the ordinance was prevented from becoming Church law. After the election of Archbishop Peter Jensen the issue was re-opened and in October 2004 a motion was put where any change to Canon Law was by-passed. This was achieved by declaring that no disciplinary action should be taken against anyone permitting lay presidency or any lay person administering “the Lord’s Supper” while a deacon or a lay person. This motion was deferred to the Diocesan Standing committee for further discussion.

Word and /or Sacrament

It is felt by the Evangelical wing of the Church that to allow only ordained people to preside at the Eucharist elevates the importance of the sacrament over the preaching of the gospel - in other words, the symbolic preaching of the gospel through the sacraments is more important than the literal preaching of the gospel. Evangelicals in some Anglican churches, therefore seriously considered introducing lay presidency. David Day says, “Both word and sacrament are places where God encounters us. We allow lay people properly authorised and trained, to preach the Word. Why can they not preside at the common meal? (Day, 1995: 114). But it is not only Evangelical Anglicans who express this view, Alwyn Marriage in her book, *The People of God: A Royal Priesthood*, states:

Those who gather for the Eucharist are the body of Christ, and in the same way as James encourages the early Christians to confess their sins to each other rather than going to a priest; so the body of Christ has no need of an intermediary to unwrap for them the deep religious significance of life through re-enactment of the Last Supper.

This ultimate sacrament, this truth beneath all truths and this life-giving embodiment of God, is complete in itself and cannot require another sacrament (ordination) to render it effective. The Eucharist is therefore a sacrament regardless of whether it is presided over by an ordained priest; and where such an ordained priest, or anyone else, is fulfilling a priestly role at communion this has more to do with the trust invested in that person by the congregation (for whatever reason) than with the conferring of a special and permanent status on them at a formal initiation ceremony called ordination. (Marriage, 1996:150)

Donald Allister, in a discussion paper for REFORM – the ultra-conservative Calvinistically leaning Anglican group in the UK – states:

¹ This is where pre-consecrated elements are taken to other churches or parishes who do not have a priest to celebrate and these elements are distributed by a deacon or lay person..

Now we have reached the situation where the prayer of consecration (or thanksgiving) at the Lord's Supper is the only part of any service which has to be said by a priest alone. This gives out several wrong messages. It makes it seem that this prayer in this service is different in kind from every other Christian act or word. It makes it seem that priests have a power or authority not available to any other Christian except by episcopal ordination. It makes it seem that bishops (and priests ordained by them) are essential to the life of the church. It makes it seem that the laity are forbidden to pray a particular prayer, or to obey a particular command of the Lord. It makes it seem possible to be a minister of the word without being a minister of the sacraments. But none of these perceptions is consistent with Scripture, and several of them are clearly refuted by the Bible. (Allister, 1993)

Evangelicals and Women leaders and Women Priests

Those with a liberal-catholic viewpoint often suggest that Sydney would have no need for lay presidency if they would only ordain women. However, conservative Evangelicals do not see the issue of Lay Presidency as a "shortage of priests" issue but rather as a delegation issue – the right of the community through the bishop to delegate the right to preside at the eucharist to who ever the community view as the most appropriate person. Bishop Roger Herft, Bishop of Newcastle in NSW, disagreed and stated in a hard-hitting newspaper article that the motivation behind Sydney's push for lay presidency was tied to the diocese's continuing opposition to the ordination of women to the priesthood. According to the bishop it is Sydney's view that by ordaining women, the Church is allowing non-suitable people to preach the word and therefore, "now that women are allowed to [administer] the sacraments and proclaim the word of God, Sydney has said 'let's devalue the currency - now anybody can do it'. It's very subtle and very sinful." (Burke, 2003)

Donald Allister's discussion paper includes the possibility that if Readers and Deacon were allowed to preside then women deacons and readers could end up teaching and ministering to men. He states that if it is appropriate to have women readers and to let them lead and preach, there is no reason why they should not also preside at the Table.

I don't expect popularity or thanks for my view, which is that evangelicals sold the pass on this long ago by not objecting to the introduction of women readers in the 1960s. I have exercised my right as an incumbent not to allow women readers, because I cannot square my conscience with women preaching. With no women readers the question of their presidency would not affect me. But for the sake of peace in the church, and respecting the views of those who differ on women readers, I would say that if a church and its leaders accept women preachers those women should be allowed to preside. (Allister, 1993)

Eucharistic Presidency in a Scriptural and Historical context

There is no explicit New Testament teaching about who should preside at the Eucharist. "There is no suggestion that anyone was ordained or appointed to an office which consisted primarily of saying blessing over bread and wine."(House of Bishops, 1997).

However, in passages such as Acts 6:3-4 there are implication that certain roles and tasks in the NT Church were carried out by specific people who had been discerned to fulfil those roles. Thus in the NT we can find a form of church government in which presbyters (priests) and deacons exercise leadership in the local church under the oversight of the Apostles. As the apostles began to die out the oversight they exercised came to be exercised by bishops. There are numerous passages in the writings of Ignatius that demonstrate this. He stressed the unity of the church was expressed by having one Eucharist celebrated either by the bishop or someone appointed by him.

From the patristic writings, Davie points out, that there was a certain degree of fluidity about who could be authorised to preside. On occasions confessors and deacons were permitted to preside but later in this period it became universal that presbyters only were authorised to preside.

Presbyters gradually became not only the presiders at the eucharist but also they presided over the local community. Having received episcopal ordination they acted with the authority of the bishop and on his behalf and as such represented the link between the local church and the universal Church (Davie, 2005: point 6.4.60).

Before moving on to the Anglican Church in the immediately pre- and post-reformation period, perhaps it is necessary to see some of the arguments against what I have just said above. If the leader of a community is both the presider of the community and of the Eucharist, surely it is acceptable that the community should have a say in who this leader should be especially in the democratic 21st Century?

Lay Leadership within the faith community

Dr Martin Davie, uses Michael Ramsay's book, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* to demonstrate: that the Church is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; that the outward order of the church is "no indifferent matter"; that the apostles are the link between Jesus and the Church of today; that the Eucharist is the sharing in Christ's death and merging of the individual into the one body; that each order or structure of the church (a baptism, a Eucharist, an apostle) tells us of our death and resurrection and the unity of the body. Davie concludes that priestly presidency fits into the pattern of the Church's outward bearing witness to the Gospel because we participate as members of the catholic church.

Both those for and against Lay Presidency agree that the role of a priest, elder, rector or incumbent is to be the leader in pastoral care, teaching of the word and liturgical worship. Archbishop Peter Carnley of Perth WA, in a sermon on the ministerial priesthood preached in 2001 points out that we live in an age of the ministry of the laity and the whole people of God. "The role of the priest is downplayed and the boundary between laity and clergy is blurred. The traditional pastoral role of parish priest has been usurped by the secular social worker and fewer and fewer functions fall within the gambit of the priest. In many places the distinctive clerical dress is less in evidence and in some places even disappeared from the sanctuary" (Carnley, 2001). However Abp Carnley believes, as do the Anglicans of Sydney that the priest still has the leadership role within the church in both the pastoral and liturgical spheres. But by allowing lay presidency, Carnely believes, this leadership role will become one staged removed.

Argument is also made that through the concept of "Priesthood of all Believers" Lay Presidency should be allowed. In this New Testament term (see 1 Peter 2.9, Revelation 1.6, 5.10, 20.6) what is being talked about is the corporate priesthood of the whole people of God rather than the priesthood of each individual Christian. A Methodist report *Called to Love and Praise* puts it well: "It will be seen that the New Testament directs us to the priesthood of the body of believers, rather than the priesthood of every believer. This latter emphasis is not necessarily wrong, but it is much more individual-centred than the language of Scripture, which stresses the inter-dependence of believers" (quoted in Davie, 2005). So, one of the issues of Eucharistic presidency is based on a confusion between this corporate priesthood of all believers and the specific priestly ministry of ordained ministers.

Carnley puts it well when he says:

...it is wrong to say that the Church is not a community gathered around a minister but a ministering community; in fact it is both. It is a community gathered around a minister, insofar as it is gathered by the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and

by the continuing general ministry of pastoral care and oversight. We do not have to deny this in insisting that the Church is also a ministering community in the world. In advocating 'total ministry' we do ourselves no service by overlooking or devaluing the distinct and unique gathering role of the priest as shepherd of the flock. This means that those set apart by prayer with the laying on of hands have a ministry that is different in kind from the priesthood they exercise together with lay people as the priesthood of all faithful people. The priesthood of all people is a ministry exercised by the whole Church in the world, the ministry of representing God to the world and praying to God for the world. The unique ministry of those admitted by ordination to ministerial priesthood is a ministry in and to the community of faith, the seamless pastoral and liturgical ministry of leadership, involving responsibility for and oversight of the community. (Carnley, 2001).

The above discussion deals with the theology of the Priesthood and of the Church and obviously Anglicans from either end of the Churchmanship spectrum will have different understanding of what these are. James Macpherson from St James, King Street Sydney one of the few parishes in Sydney that disagrees with the Diocese's stand on lay presidency summarises it well when he says that lay presidency "encourages an inappropriate congregational self-sufficiency, which compromises the dynamic order uniting the Church's members and [world wide] worshipping communities. (McPherson, 1999)

Anglican Theology of the Eucharist

The Anglican Church is a church of the reformation and therefore has a particular understanding of a theology of the Eucharist. Obviously once again this understanding is going to be coloured by which church party one belongs to.

Medieval Catholic Christianity sought to offer a way for Christians to be saved and to enter the joys of heaven. It found this in the medieval religious practice centred on the Eucharist, where the offering of the mass ensured the salvation of those who had died. The celebration of the Mass with the familiar objects of bread and wine were understood by all and stood as one of the two pillars of the pre-Reformation Catholic world which were:

" ... first, a devotional pattern centred on the power of the mass and the power of the clergy who performed it, and second, the unity provided by the Pope. Virtually no one in 1500 could have considered that Catholicism could stand without the combined support of these two pillars." (MacCulloch quoted in Douglas, 2006).

MacCulloch further argues that the Reformers attempted to bring down both these pillars of the Catholic world and to construct a devotional world which was:

"dramatically simpler than the rich and untidy fabric of medieval Catholicism, and at its centre, in place of the sequence of actions and formal texts which made up the mass, was the apprehension of a set of ideas by the Christian believer, fortified by constant access to the Bible in reading or in sermons. The emphasis had shifted from objects and actions to words." (MacCulloch quoted in Douglas, 2006).

Brian Douglas views this as essentially a move from a view of the sacraments that was based on realism and the sacramental principle to a view based on nominalism and propositional revelation or the mere naming of the Body and Blood of Christ without belief in the reality behind this. (Douglas, 2006)

However the situation in England was different from the rest of the Reformed Church. In England only one of MacCulloch's two pillars fell. "Papal overlordship was decisively

repudiated, but the old devotional world was treated in a much more ambiguous fashion" (MacCulloch quoted in Douglas, 2006)

Between the accession of Edward VI in 1547 and the implementation of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, there were two prevailing theologies of the Eucharist, a catholic realist theology, where sign and signified were linked in relation to the Eucharist and a protestant nominalist theology where sign and signified were not linked in relation to the Eucharist. Cranmer and Becon, for example, exemplify the nominalist stream and theologians such as Andrewes and Cosin (and indeed Ridley and Latimer to a lesser extent) exemplify a muted realist stream.

In the House of Bishops book - *Eucharistic Presidency* the diversity of these positions are maintained. The Bishops "affirm that the Eucharist is a means of genuine sharing in Christ, of an authentic unity with him" where "Christ renews his engagement with those he has claimed through baptism" (House of Bishops, 1997: 34). This engagement is not seen as magical or automatic but as being "bound up with faith which is the gift of God" (House of Bishops, 1997: 34). The Eucharist is not simply a means of meditating on Christ and the significance of the cross, but "it mediates the gift of Christ's saving presence" (House of Bishops, 1997: 34).

The Bishops argue that Christ's ministry did not end with the event of Calvary, they continue:

"A simple contrast between atoning sacrifice and our sacrifice of praise will be insufficient, for this bypasses Christ's continuing risen, human ministry. Stemming from the particular and unrepeatable self-offering in which the Son of God has assumed our humanity, purged it of its sin and re-created it, in the Eucharist, we, the first-fruits of his death and resurrection, are offered by Christ to the Father." (House of Bishops, 1997: 35).

The Eucharist then is about more than a subjective response of praise and thanksgiving, since in the Eucharist the presence and sacrifice of Christ is mediated to those who partake. This would seem to be an expression of moderate realism.

The moderate realist linking of "sign" and "signified" is affirmed in the whole eucharistic action and not just in the bread and wine. The Bishops say:

"The participation in Christ's past, present and future is made possible by the Holy Spirit. The epiclesis - the invocation of the Holy Spirit - is thus a crucial part of the eucharistic action. It is best understood not as focussed narrowly on the elements of bread and wine and a supposed 'moment' of consecration, but on the whole life of God's people as expressed in the entire eucharistic action, to sanctify both us and the bread and wine, so that in our corporate eating and drinking we may be united to Christ. As the Spirit binds us to Christ in his offering of himself to the Father, we are directed back to the once-made-sacrifice of Christ, his victory over sin and evil. But in being drawn back we are also pointed forwards: the Spirit unites us to the risen and ascended Christ who is yet to come and brings about here and now a foretaste of God's final kingdom." (House of Bishops, 1997: 36).

The oneness with Christ is inherited in a hierarchal form through the Apostles, the bishops and the priests to the laity. All this leads us back to the link between the leader of faith community being the presider at the Eucharist. The person who does the day-to-day pastoral and liturgical work is the leader of the community and thus that ministerial leader should preside. Abp Peter Carnley says:

The priestly absolution following the general confession, and the priestly blessing of the people at the end of the eucharist are really not essential elements of any

eucharist. But the Great Thanksgiving or anaphora most certainly is. This prayer of blessing is the second element of the fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing, which Our Lord himself commanded to be done in remembrance of him. The prayer of blessing is the verbal centre of the eucharist.

Now, it is this prayer in which thanksgiving is offered to God for creation and redemption, and in which the Church commemorates and brings to remembrance the death and resurrection of Christ and is itself reminded of its unique identity as the Body of Christ. Moreover, it is in the course of the prayer of thanksgiving over loaf and cup, culminating in communion, which is received 'by faith with thanksgiving' that the community is not just reminded of something but actually formed and renewed as the Body of Christ. At this point pastoral oversight and liturgical oversight coincide: the pastoral work of the ordained becomes a liturgical work and the liturgical becomes the pastoral.

That is perhaps the single most important and compelling reason why it is appropriate that those ordained to this distinctive ministry in the life of the Church of overseeing the formation of the Church as the Body of Christ do actually lead the Great Thanksgiving. It is the central prayer in which, culminating in communion, the community is formed as the Body of Christ. (Carnley, 2001)

Very little is given on the Evangelical Anglican's theology of the Eucharist. It is viewed as equal (if not inferior) to preaching of the word and should be available only to faithful believers three times a year. Reading between the lines of Donald Allister's discussion paper, one can soon see that it does not play a central role as preaching the word. These paragraphs from his paper are examples:

The present rules encourage the belief that the Lord's Supper is somehow different in kind from Morning or Evening Prayer. Some evangelicals have given up robing at non-sacramental services, but not at communion. Others have taken to wearing different robes for communion. What is all this saying? Surely it is the word which is first and foremost. If we need to dress up or colourfully for anything it must be for that. But if we should not robe, or only robe modestly, for other services, how can we justify doing so for communion. Is communion a different kind of event from every other church service?

I am still far from persuaded by the parish communion movement. In both churches where I have been incumbent I have increased fortnightly 8.00 am communions to weekly and decreased main communions. Now I am delighted to report that we have no communions at 11.00 am or 6.30 pm on Sundays. Communion follows Morning Prayer once a month and Evening Prayer once a month. On Maundy Thursday and Christmas Eve it is at 8.00 pm and only advertised to regular worshippers. I hold a communion service every Sunday, and teach the Prayer Book rubric "that every Parishioner shall communicate at least three times in the year, of which Easter to be one". But I wonder whether communion properly belongs in the parish church as a public service rather than in smaller informal meetings. And I wonder what the Lord meant by "Do this, whenever you drink it": did he mean on every occasion we eat and drink with other believers or (as I suspect) whenever you celebrate the Passover, that is once a year? I simply ask the question. But I cannot help observing that the reintroduction of guaranteed non-sacramental main services has helped outsiders and fringe members to perceive the church as much less self-centred and much more user-friendly. (Allister, 1993)

Wider Ramification

The issue of lay-presidency does influence Anglican relationships with churches which allow lay presidency. This is why the book, *In the Spirit of the Covenant*² has a large section on the Anglican and Methodist perspectives on lay presidency. It does appear to a certain extent that some careful tap dancing is done to try and keep all sides happy. The Anglican Methodist Covenant includes the following affirmation: 'We acknowledge that in both our churches the word of God is authentically preached, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are duly administered and celebrated.' (Anglican-Methodist Covenant as quoted in Davie, 2005).

Conclusion

The current position of only episcopally ordained clergy presiding at the Eucharist receives support from most Anglicans in the Communion. Lambeth 1998 rejected the idea of lay presidency:

Such a development would challenge the tradition of the church catholic that ordained ministry serves the church by uniting word and sacrament, pastoral care and oversight of the Christian community. Presiding at the Eucharist is the most obvious expression of this unity. Lay presidency would also create major difficulties with many of our ecumenical partners as well as within the Anglican Communion. We are not able to endorse this proposal (Lambeth 1998, 1999:202)

The current situation of clerical presidency has also been supported by the Anglican Consultative Council and the International Liturgical Consultation (IALC-5) who met in Dublin in 1995. Their Statement proposes a clear way forward:

If such persons are acting as leaders of a Christian community, they are exercising what are essentially presbyteral functions, and therefore ought to be ordained as presbyters [i.e. priests]. The authorisation by a bishop of a deacon or lay person to preside at the eucharist constitutes an appointment to office, rendering 'lay presidency' a contradiction in terms. Moreover, the sign of appointment to presidential office in Anglican tradition is the laying-on-of-hands and prayer.

On the other hand, REFORM's discussion paper suggests that, like the Anglo-Catholics who simply broke Canon Law in the matter of candles on the Altar, use of incense etc because they believed the law to be wrong, so Evangelicals should ignore the laws that "hinder the Gospel" (Allister, 1993).

Dr Davie in his commentary on the Anglican Methodist Covenant see the traditional clerical presidency as the only solution and the shortage of priest being met by fostering greater number of vocations to both stipendiary and non-stipendiary priesthood. (Davie, 2005:6.4.80)

Nor is this situation purely an Anglican issue. Experimentation is already underway in Catholic Churches in Holland with Lay Presidency. In place of the priest, men and women selected by the faithful, preside and all together pronounce the words of consecration, which are varied as desired. In the view of the Dutch Dominicans, this is what Vatican Council II wanted. For the Dominicans there are three expectations from Vatican II: that men and women be selected "from below" to preside over the Eucharistic celebration; that, ideally, "this choice would be followed by a confirmation or blessing or ordination by Church authority"; that the words of consecration "could be pronounced both by those who preside in the Eucharist and by the community from which they take their origin." (Peters, 2007)

² This booklet reviews the Covenant between the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the Church of England.

It is not only the Evangelicals who see Lay Presidency as the future. Retired bishop John Shelby Spong of Newark in his book *Why Christianity must change or die* predicts the future of the Church which includes:

- The loss of priestly authority and priestly respect
- Lay people presiding at the Eucharist during the next century, even in Catholic circles.
- Worship not be oriented toward an external God but toward the world of our human community.
- The ritual of the mass in which bread and wine is converted into the body and blood of Jesus will be replaced by the original Christian ritual, the shared meal -- open to all who are hungry. (from a review on the 'net)

But as a Liberal Catholic is my personal dilemma answered by Bishop John Shelby Spong predictions? In the preparation of this paper I have been challenged tremendously to think through the things I do automatically and to realise more and more why I do them and what is behind the actions. Although I doubt I will move my line in the sand concerning Lay Presidency, what I have read has made me realise that I must be open to new ideas but also to test these ideas in as many different ways as possible to see if they are from God.

Resources used

All resources were taken off the internet. Many were books and papers that are on internet sites in their entirety – in these cases I've listed them under the authors. Where they are news articles or part of a web page I have used the URL.

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