

## Response of the Standing Committee to the Synod Committee Report on the Theological Principles Governing the Church's Use of its Property

*This report was received by the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1980.*

At its meeting in October 1979 the Diocesan Synod passed the following resolution (32/79) -

"Synod receives the report of the Committee on Theological Principles Governing the Church's Use of its Property and whilst acknowledging that it represents only a preliminary enquiry into a vast area of Christian ethics, recommends its careful study by Standing Committee, parishes and other diocesan organisations and agencies; and asks the Anglican Information Office to arrange for the report, after appropriate editing, to be made available to parishes and other purchasers."

At the meeting next following Synod, the Standing Committee appointed a sub-committee to prepare a response in order to assist Standing Committee in its study of the report. The sub-committee consisted of: Bishops A. J. Dain and D. W. B. Robinson, Canon D. B. Knox, Mr. G. R. Christmas and Mr. N. Malone and this paper is based on their work.

Standing Committee is most desirous that the response which is set out hereunder will be a further contribution to the continuing debate in relation to a matter which is of considerable importance to the life and ministry of the Diocese. Attention has been addressed to sections 3 to 7 inclusive of the Synod Report. Sections 1 and 2 are procedural only and section 8 contains an outline for six studies.

### **Section 3 "The Church and the Contemporary Situation"**

The Standing Committee recognizes the general force of what is said in this section, and endorses the Report's proposal that theological principles and guidelines should be established to govern the use of resources entrusted to the various groups and their activities within the Diocese.

However, we would point out that in speaking of the "economic activity" of "the Church" in "secular society", the Report in fact has in view a large diocesan organization comprising nearly 300 parochial units with the Synod which governs its affairs. The Report does not suggest that there is anything wrong with this "structure" in itself; yet it is obvious that any kind of "economic activity" relating to such a structure as a whole is likely to project the image of "big business".

It is also important to remember that by the Church's wealth in "endowments from our colonial age" is meant, in the first place, land or money placed by donors in the hands of trustees to be used for the benefit of the parishes or organizations of the Diocese, or of the bishops in various ways. It is possibly unfortunate that the Corporate Trustee, or other trustees, are not more clearly distinguished, in the public mind, from "the Diocese" or the other beneficiaries. For one does not speak of trustees as "wealthy", and beneficiaries have limited responsibility in the disposition of their benefits. Furthermore, church trusts are not private trusts primarily for the benefit of individual beneficiaries but are charitable trusts under which the property (subject to powers of variation) is devoted to designated purposes in perpetuity. No doubt the Synod has wide powers through its ultimate control of diocesan organizations and of elections, and it may be that problems of "public image" would appear less if these powers were decentralized in some way; but the Report does not appear to address itself to criticism of synodical or diocesan structure as such.

### **Section 4 "The Biblical Witness - An Overview"**

This is a useful overview, but three modifications may be offered.

First, it is claimed that the provisions of the Old Testament law for the poor are "rights for the disadvantaged, not options for the privileged", and that the gleaning laws "provided for the poor as a matter of right rather than haphazard handouts by relatively wealthy philanthropists". Certainly, the law placed an obligation (not merely an option) on the better-off Israelite to share with his neighbour, but it is not correct to interpret this, in modern parlance, as a "right" for the poor. If they were neglected, the poor had no redress under the law, and the apparently "ethical and theological overtones" of the terms "rich" and "poor" which the Report notices in some parts of the Old Testament are simply the result of the fact that, when the poor found no relief from their neighbours, they could look only to God, and not man, for succour. The poor man who cries to God thus becomes the type of the man of faith.

Secondly, while Christians (and others) should learn from the Old Testament law that God requires love of neighbour and compassion for the poor in all circumstances, it should be pointed out that the provisions of the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25), which Isaiah 61 uses in the prophecy of the coming Kingdom of God ("good tidings to the poor . . . the acceptable year of the Lord"), is not used in an economic sense but in a spiritual sense by Jesus when he, too, "preached good tidings to the poor" as recorded in Matthew 5:3 and Luke 4:18. Even less in the New Testament than in the Old Testament is there any evidence that the economically poor have "rights" to provision from their neighbours. The only hope of satisfaction for the poor and oppressed, in the New Testament, is in the Kingdom of God; though there are signs of this hope in the miracles of Jesus and

in the "new law" which finds expression among believers in Christ who bear one another's burdens. These comments have some bearing on principles No. (12) and (13) in Section 6.

Thirdly, the "transformed economic relationships" which follow the "transformed relationships" between Jesus' followers did not, and do not now, follow any one particular economic order of things (e.g. a common purse), and may not involve any change of economic order at all; the essential change is in motive and spirit.

### **Section 5 "Coming to Terms with the Biblical Witness - A Problem of Procedure"**

The Report in section 5 makes a sudden jump to what it calls "the Bible's teaching on structural injustice or institutionalized evil". However, it provides no declared basis for this from the Bible itself. Principle No. (14) in section 6 relating to "corporately held wealth" may or may not be sound, but it is difficult to see how it derives from Biblical teaching since there appear to be no clear examples of "corporately held wealth" in the Bible, unless we include the treasury of the Temple or the common purse of the disciples and of the Jerusalem Church. The texts quoted at the foot of page 117 are not relevant. Two of them, Isaiah 10:1-4 and Psalm 94:20, may refer to unjust laws, but that is another subject, and the rest deal with an employer's relationship with his employees, which is merely one instance of a man (not) loving his neighbour as himself: they are not examples of corporately held wealth or institutionalised evil. James 5 addresses rich men generally but does not have a corporation in view.

The Standing Committee does not find the general condemnation of "evil structures" helpful. No structure is evil of itself: evil is in the human will and is the misuse of power or failure in relationships. Although some structures should be changed so as to remove temptations to abuse or to increase checks on unjust use of power, it is important to identify the right target in our criticisms. If "all power tends to corrupt", *all* structures "make injustice possible"; but we can hardly advocate the abolition of all structures.

The attention of the Standing Committee has been drawn to a substantial criticism of Ronald Sider's thesis (on which the Report appears to lean rather heavily) in an article "World Poverty and Christian Responsibility" by Malcolm Alison in *The Christian Graduate* (London, December 1979).

### **Section 6 "Principles of A Biblical Theology of Wealth"**

In relation to this subject generally, Standing Committee prefers to employ the term "property" or "resources" rather than "wealth", which latter term is emotive in content and denotes more than just accumulated property. Certainly many would view the Diocese of Sydney as "wealthy" but nevertheless such term is only capable of precise meaning when used in comparison with other persons or bodies who may hold less or more property or resources.

Before dealing with the various principles set out in this section of the Synod Report, it may be helpful to offer a general comment on the subject of "the theology of wealth" or, as we would prefer to describe it, "the theology of property".

It is basic to all our considerations that all property is ultimately owned by God, our Father and Creator, and man is entrusted with its management and use. Property is given for us to use as a means of support for ourselves, in respect of which our natural response is that of thanksgiving, and as a means of service to a neighbour as an expression of love. Property can be acquired by right or wrong means, that is, by earning or gift or by theft.

Some hold and use more property than others and such inequality will always exist and is not always or necessarily evil, unless such inequality is associated with wrongful acquisition, oppression, injustice or sinful attitudes in its use or management. It is not always or necessarily wrong to be relatively rich (producing a sense of guilt) and it is not necessarily less wrong to be relatively poor (producing a sense of righteousness). God is always concerned with inner motives and attitudes and encourages wisdom, prudence and responsible stewardship whether the quantum of property is small (as in the case of relative poverty) or large (as in the case of relative riches). Wrongful use of property (whether by "rich" or "poor") is a breach of such responsibility for which Christians are accountable.

The ways in which our attitudes may be expressed and evidenced in practice will vary according to different individuals and circumstances. Either accumulation or disposal of property may be appropriate but neither is prescribed absolutely in all cases and situations. Where property is entrusted to us on conditions or understandings, then these must be observed as binding upon us. The careful management of property takes account of anticipated or possible future needs, as well as observed and actual present needs.

In all cases prudent use will involve wisdom in management, compassion, skill, judgment, experience and spiritual vision.

The following are particular responses to the 18 principles set forth in the Synod Report -

- (1) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (9) (11) and (17) all appear indisputable.
- (2) Standing Committee acknowledges the serious dangers involved in the use of property. Loyalty to God and loyalty to mammon are inconsistent and incompatible. However, wealth or property is not the only danger which may affect our relationships with God. We do not quarrel with paragraph (a), but paragraph (b) is not well balanced. Property brings us into relationship with other people and with nature, but this relationship may be used in service of other people and for the benefit of nature in motives of love and service, or such relationship may be exploitive in the abuse of power. In regard to paragraph (c) it should be said that property or money of itself does not create the false sense of material security which is described. Such a "false sense of material security" only arises when such property or money is, or becomes, an idol or object of worship.
- (8) There are already within the Diocese various instances which could be quoted where congregations are assisting one another and we have various diocesan organisations which assist needy areas within the Diocese and beyond. However, there is a liberty permitted within Biblical teaching which should not necessarily require every congregation to use its economic resources in one particular way. One congregation may feel and conclude that it is God's will for that congregation to share its economic resources, whereas another congregation may consider that God's purposes require it to lay emphasis upon local needs for the time-being and should not feel guilty or spiritually inferior to a congregation which may be under God sharing its economic resources to a greater extent than itself. As may be said about many of these principles the terms used need more precise definition. For example, the reference to "sharing" may involve community of goods, generosity, distribution to the needy, or it may involve complete abolition of private property.
- (10) Certainly all Christians equally with bishops and deacons should exercise responsibility and care in the use of property entrusted to their use. But some Christians practise a style of life which is more modest than others, and this does not confer any particular righteousness, or mean that the more affluent Christian is to feel guilty. Modesty of lifestyle is relative to the social or economic group in which the person is situated.
- (12) A Christian should certainly share his concern for this situation by sharing, though mere redistribution without a solution concerning productivity and the use of resources may be inadequate. But the transition from "Christians individually" to "the Church generally" is not a simple one in view of the different kind of responsibility exercised by trustees or councils from the responsibility exercised by an individual Christian.
- (13) People's basic economic needs are not fundamentally related either to justice or right. Justice is giving a person what is due to him. For those who work, justice is receiving a fair reward for this work. For those who cannot find work, mercy, not justice, is called for. This mercy may take the form of "handouts" which should not be despised as a form of charitable giving but a better form will be using our talents and resources to create opportunities for useful work. For those who will not work, justice is that they should not eat! (II Thess. 3:10). We do not have innate rights against our fellow men, so much as obligations towards them.
- (14) Structures are necessary for order and organization within any group of individuals. Those operating within structures, such as parishes and dioceses, are not necessarily separated from face to face relationships and the structures themselves should contain checks and balances and safeguards to ensure that personal responsibility is not evaded.
- (15) As under (12) it should be added that unlike the case of the average individual Christian, the property of the Church is subject to trusts which must be observed.
- (16) We endorse this Pauline principle and believe it is capable of being used by groups as well as individuals, but it must be left to the Christian judgement of the bodies entrusted with decisions as to when it is applicable. Offence may sometimes be necessary as well as sometimes unnecessary.
- (18) The motive of service and the love of neighbour should determine all our economic activity. It must be realized this cannot be at the expense of faithfulness in stewardship of economic activity (I Cor. 4:2). That the welfare of people should take priority over the making of profits is true, but this aphorism is inadequately stated. Profits should be one form of service. The making of profits should be for the welfare of people, both for those affected by the undertaking and those who ultimately benefit from the profit. There should be no conflict of interest between these three groups of people, and if there is a conflict the matter can only be determined by Christian judgement by the body concerned.

## Section 7 Practical Applications - the Principles Implemented

### 1. *"Decision makers - the Personnel"*

Standing Committee would endorse the recommendations contained in paragraph (a) and they are already in operation. Both the Standing Committee and the Synod have a very clear understanding that those who are elected to all offices in the Church should be those who are committed church-attending Christians and this can easily be seen by the present membership of all diocesan committees.

Turning to paragraph (b) we agree that some persons with theological training, especially in the field of Christian ethics, should be involved in decision-making processes but it should be pointed out that there is provision made in the great majority of Standing Committee and Synod elections for this to operate. Many of the ordinances lay down quite clearly that a certain number of the members of particular committees should be clergy and obviously this is done so that those with particular theological and ethical insights should serve in these areas. However, it must be clearly stated that while fully agreeing and endorsing these views, piety and theological and ethical insights are of themselves not an adequate basis upon which to formulate decisions in the area of investment and there must always be a balance with committed Christians who have the necessary insight and expertise to assist in these matters.

Turning to the committee's recommendation that there should be a "Theological Committee of Investment Review", it is the considered view of Standing Committee that such a move would neither be practical nor helpful. Such a proposal misunderstands the role for which the Church already invites certain men to exercise their judgement on the basis of their ability, experience and Christian insight. In relation to these matters there are obviously divergent views held by deeply committed Christians in this area and an ongoing dialogue subsequent to the 1980 Session of Synod may well be the best way forward. All major committees already operate under general guidelines which may need revision from time to time.

### 2. *"Church Inequalities"*

The Standing Committee would endorse this section but would, however, indicate -

- (i) that there are many ways in which these goals are already being achieved in the Diocese; and
- (ii) the financial viability of a parish is not wholly governed by the socio-economic factors mentioned in this paragraph, but in many cases is governed by factors of spiritual vitality. There are some parishes in the Western Suburbs whose per capita giving is much higher than so-called wealthy parishes in the Eastern and Northern Suburbs.

### 3. *"Investments"*

This section raises what is probably the biggest single question in the whole report, namely: should the Church continue its current role in utilising its assets in the right kind of property ownership and/or development? The dangers of the Church being associated with "commercial trading activities" are frankly recognised and exist throughout the world.

Several important factors must be borne in mind in the whole area of investment. The greatest section of current assets and properties held in this Diocese are at present clearly impressed with trusts and as such these assets and their income must be preserved for the purposes of these trusts. Even such trusts can be varied if their inexpediency can be properly established but it is clearly not easy to arrive at the degree of consensus needed to establish such inexpediency.

Standing Committee would clearly differentiate between two differing factors which can govern such decisions. First, there is the important matter of moral principles and the current diocesan practice can be clearly defended in this area. Secondly, there are sociological principles, some of which are expounded in this report which would question the wisdom of current diocesan practices. Standing Committee believes that this is an area where there is, and will continue to be, a divergence of opinion held by committed Christians.

Accepting the legal obligations of imposed trusts and while meeting all moral and ethical requirements, there would still be a wide variety of options open to the Diocese, and Synod has all the power it needs to lay down guidelines in this area which could reflect the varying models mentioned in the Report.

### 4. *"Model 1 . . ."*

In discussing the disadvantages of current practice, the report moves from the question of investment itself to the matter of the Church's use of the income received from investments, with special reference to the General and Special Purposes Assessments. It may be helpful to point out that the vast majority of the beneficiaries have been placed in one or other of the assessments by specific acts of Synod and that the allocations are debated year by year with exhaustive report of the reasons for the grants made to each beneficiary. Here again individual opinions will obviously differ, but there has never been any concerted action in Synod to change the fundamental pattern of allocation. It remains however, entirely Synod's prerogative to do so if it so desires.

The Report has clearly stimulated a widespread discussion within the Diocese on "the theological principles that should govern the contemporary church's use of its property". If actual changes are to occur in the policies followed hitherto, it will be necessary for the Synod itself to adopt an explicit statement of theological principles which are different from those implicitly followed at present. The Report has been received as a preliminary enquiry only, and the Synod is evidently not yet ready to endorse a specific statement of theological principles. But the discussion should continue, and the possibilities of alternative models (consistent with basic principles) studied.

18 August 1980