

# A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE PARISH SYSTEM

*A Report by the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission*

2023

Synod, in light of the anticipated growth of new communities in greenfields areas of the Diocese, the speed at which this growth is occurring, and the urgent need to plant churches to reach them, requests the Doctrine Commission to prepare a report on the parish system for the 2023 session of Synod, with special attention to:

- a) Its definition, history, theological rationale and pastoral objectives,
- b) Its relationship to a biblical ecclesiology that prioritises the local congregation as the arena for gospel mission and ministry, and
- c) Its continuing usefulness in a complex urban and semi-urban environment

## **Introduction**

1. The Doctrine Commission provides the following brief report on the parish system and its continuing usefulness. However, members of Synod are encouraged to read previous Doctrine Commission reports that cover similar ground to what is being presented here, in particular the 2021 report, *The Unchanging Heart of Parochial Incumbency?* and the 2008 report, *A Theology of Christian Assembly*.

## **Definition, History, Theological Rational and Pastoral Objectives of Parish System**

2. The establishment of local churches is a corresponding implication of the evangelism we see taking place in the New Testament. Throughout The Acts of the Apostles, cities and regions were significant to the gospel preaching ministry conducted by the apostles and other evangelists. Both the New Testament and early post New Testament epistles were generally written to specific local churches (e.g., Romans) or to a number of churches in a region (e.g., 1 Peter). There is no reference to parishes in the New Testament.
3. The English word 'parish' has its root in the Greek word *paroikia*, meaning district. In the early Christian centuries, the Roman Empire organised its jurisdictional administration using dioceses. These, however, did not correspond with what later became the ecclesiastical divisions using these terms. An imperial diocese was a very large geographical area (e.g., Britain or the Iberian Peninsula) and a parish was a smaller region. Early ecclesiastical use of the term *parish* dates from about the fourth century AD but was used at that time of large areas that later roughly corresponded to ecclesiastical dioceses.
4. During the early Middle Ages, ecclesiastical dioceses which contained many local churches were divided up into several parishes. The word parish thus came to refer to a defined area surrounding a church where the people in that area were responsible for paying tithes to that church. As an example of how closely the

establishment of the parish was tied to local ecclesiastical taxation, the related term *benefice*, which simply means income associated with a particular church, became virtually synonymous with *parish*. The incumbent was the cleric entitled to the income of the parish and was appointed by the patron who was also responsible for maintaining the church building. Patrons could be ecclesiastical (e.g., bishop or abbot) or lay (e.g., noble or landowner).

5. While Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury has been traditionally regarded as the founder of the English parish system in the seventh century, there is strong evidence that parishes existed in England much earlier. The dioceses and parishes of England underwent significant refinement after the Norman invasion in 1066, but the bounds of most rural parishes have remained largely unchanged since the thirteenth century.
6. The English parish took on the double function of being both an ecclesiastical unit as well as the most basic unit of civil government. In other words, Parish councils were responsible for far more than the ministry of the church. Since the late nineteenth century, those two tasks have been divided and parishes are served by both a parish council which looks after secular matters (like roads), and a parish church council (PCC) which is focused on the ministry of the church.
7. At the time of the Reformation, the English Church, like most reformed traditions (e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed), maintained the parish system. All who lived within the boundaries of a particular parish were considered members of the parish church and so were both entitled to its ministrations and obliged to pay tithes. Over the centuries, however, tithes and glebes produced radically different incomes from parish to parish. One parish could be worth 7,000 pounds per year while the neighbouring parish could be worth 40 pounds. Moreover, England was slow to adapt the parish system to population growth, as any changes needed to pass through parliament.<sup>1</sup>
8. Nevertheless, the strength of the parish system was that a minister was tasked with the responsibility of proclaiming God's word and administering the sacraments to all the people within a geographic location. However, while parish boundaries can be seen as a positive development, ensuring that every person has someone tasked with the cure of their soul, many ministers were not doing their job of proclaiming the grace of Christ to their parishioners. In these cases, the boundaries had turned into barriers to the gospel. It was this that led John Wesley to declare 'the whole world is my parish'. The evangelicals from the beginning worked both inside and outside the parish system to build the kingdom of Christ.
9. When Christian ministry began in Australia in 1788, its earliest form was extra parochial and extra diocesan, although certainly evangelical and Anglican. There were no bishops or dioceses outside the British Isles until Samuel Seabury was consecrated for the newly independent Episcopal Church in the USA in 1784.

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<sup>1</sup> As an example of the lack of agility within the English parish system, note the time between consecutive New Parish Acts – 1710, 1818.

Although by that point there had been Anglican churches in the colonies for more than 150 years, oversight of these churches by the Bishop of London was seen as adequate. For this reason, Richard Johnson's friend and mentor John Newton often quipped that Johnson was, in fact, 'the Bishop of Botany Bay' and contrasted his missionary enterprise with 'parish' ministry in England. Within a few decades, however, ministry in Sydney was regularised and parishes were established, albeit not with the traditional obligation of tithing for those within their bounds because the chaplains were paid by the government. In 1836, the diocese of Australia was founded, and the number of parishes continued to multiply. In the following decades, new dioceses were established around the country.

10. The benefits of the parish system were advantageous in settled areas like expanding suburbs and regional towns where ministry was theoretically provided to every resident, and often the church became a point of community focus. However, the inflexibility and lumbering nature of the system meant that Anglicans were relatively ineffective in times of rapid change and transience (such as during the gold rushes of the Victorian era), especially when compared with the Methodists.
11. In more recent years, churches have been established which have focused on particular social, demographic, ethnic or other networks, alongside the traditional local parish divisions across the diocese. Sydney Diocese has accommodated these changes by recognising churches that are Anglican, but which do not fall into the traditional parish system.

### **Parish System's Relationship to Biblical Ecclesiology**

12. As noted above, the New Testament's theology of church does not mandate the parish system, but neither is the system inconsistent with biblical ecclesiology. Christians have consistently gathered in local congregations, as noted in the Doctrine Commission's Report *A Theology of Christian Assembly* (2008):

From the very beginning, Christian believers met together. Those who responded to Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), purposefully and frequently assembling in different places (in the temple and in their homes, v. 46). Wherever the gospel of Christ went, assemblies were formed, meeting in households (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5) and in larger groups (1 Cor. 14:23).

13. Local churches also have an ongoing theological purpose, as the same report makes clear:

Thus, when Christians meet together now in the midst of a groaning creation, each particular gathering is both a manifestation of our union with Christ and each other before God's throne in the heavenly realms and an anticipation of the ultimate assembly of God's people around his throne in a

renewed creation... They have been gathered by the triune God himself, who is powerfully present in them.

14. While the ordered division of geographic areas into distinct and contiguous areas of ministry responsibility is not evident in the New Testament, segregated spheres of ministry can be seen. For example, Paul in Galatians 2:9 describes his agreement with Peter and James that they should go to the Jews and that he should go to the Gentiles. This rationale is not dissimilar to that of the cure of souls associated with the parish system.

### **Parish System's Continuing Usefulness**

15. The continuing usefulness of the parish system is dependent on churches remaining faithful to the gospel and expressing biblical ecclesiology in local areas. As noted in the Doctrine Commission's Report, *The Unchanging Heart of Parochial Incumbency* (2021), Anglican clergy make significant promises which were written with parish ministry in mind:

For every parish church a minister (or ministers) is appointed to serve that local area. The promises the priest (rector) makes reflect his role: 'to teach and forewarn, to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep who are scattered abroad...' The scope of this charge was always conceived to be a specific parish area.

16. At the same time, to focus exclusively on parish churches may be detrimental to contemporary mission in our complex, multicultural and urban diocese. As the same report goes on to say:

Changes and challenges have come to this geographical model due to the greater mobility of people (who freely travel between suburbs and regions), and also to the growth of ethnic or other communities who seek to meet together around shared language, culture and place of origin. Consequently, many Christians bypass their 'local' gathering to find spiritual strengthening in other parishes. This is also the case with social networks in the community at large. They are rarely bound by a local main street, or even neighbouring suburbs. Rather, networks form around language or cultural groups, socio-economic or migrant needs, religious affiliations and more. The result is a multi-ethnic urban setting with highly complex social networks. This poses a further challenge to the traditional model of the cure of souls. As a consequence, ministers may not be able to reach all the various cultural or linguistic groups in their geographical parish, since a variety of approaches, or culturally or linguistically sensitive ministries, may be needed.

17. The 'Recognised Churches Ordinance 2000' of our diocese has evolved into a response to this reality. Its original intention notwithstanding, it has become a mechanism to create new churches within the boundaries of existing parishes. According to the report, which gave the rationale for this ministry pattern, 'the

responsibilities of the recognised church are the same as the responsibilities of a parish. However, the pastoral responsibilities of a minister of a recognised church would be limited to the members of the church'. The rationale behind this was to allow flexibility in mission, especially if the church was established to reach a particular ethnic or social group. This is a different model from that received and implemented throughout the diocese from its inception and introduces another level of complexity to the question of the scope of the cure of souls. The minister is no longer committed to seeking all of Christ's sheep in a particular area, but some of Christ's sheep in many areas.

18. The parish system has some flexibility to adapt to different church planting methods and ministries that aim to reach various groups. However, when new ministries are planted within the boundaries of another parish, it can often lead to relational tensions. These can not only undermine the new venture but deter others from making similar attempts. Yet perhaps a more significant issue is the rising amount of ministry workers dependent on long term fundraising. Many must function less like a traditional parish minister and more like a church planting missionary. However, the costs of the parish system remain the same, making it difficult for some parishes to operate financially. Furthermore, if we aim to raise leaders from more culturally diverse areas or with lower socio-economic backgrounds, we must recognise that the educational, financial, and linguistic barriers they face to becoming a parish minister are significant.

## **Conclusion**

19. In the light of the anticipated growth of new communities in greenfields areas of the Diocese, the speed at which this growth is occurring, and the urgent need to plant churches to reach them, it is clear that the parish system will continue to play a significant role in establishing and growing churches in local communities, with a primary focus on those within parish boundaries. It is also important to note, however, that it is desirable for parishes to be complemented by other churches which may be more effective at reaching the diversity of people within large, multicultural cities. There is no theological reason why these two systems could not exist alongside each other as parallel strategies for reaching the lost and providing pastoral care within the Diocese. Each has its own theological integrity as an expression of biblical ecclesiology. The difficulties that may remain are largely practical and logistical rather than theological.

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