

Chairman's Report
1 April 2017

Twelve months have passed since the membership entrusted me with the Chairmanship of the Ecclesiastical Law Society. A year ago I rattled through the AGM at break-neck speed so that Baroness Hale of Richmond could deliver her keynote address. This year I seek your indulgence to take the meeting at a more leisurely pace in order to review and reflect upon the many achievements since the formation of the Society here in Cambridge exactly thirty years ago, and to describe and explain the direction and speed of travel which the Committee has in mind for the future.

We have lost a number of friends from within the ranks of the Society over the last year; but I want to make particular mention of the Venerable Hughie Jones. He was a founder member, present at Corpus Christi in 1987, holding office as Archdeacon of Loughborough. He agreed to convene a working party on Education in Canon Law, and subsequently became the Executive Officer of the Society, an honorary role whose duties are now undertaken by the Administrator. He was a familiar figure at conferences, affable, approachable and affirming, who regarded his work within the Society as an extension of his priestly ministry. And as we remember Hughie, I hope we continue to follow his example and treat all we do in the service of the Society as a means of witness to the gospel, in pursuit of the mission of the church.

Hughie helped to shape and direct the work of the Society, as did many others, and it is helpful to look back on the Society's journey from its starting point, described in the first issue of the Journal, which was then a rather inelegant stapled pamphlet when compared to the scholarly periodical into which it has morphed over the following decades. We have trawled the Society's archives and included within the glossy conference brochure a list of all thirty conferences which the Society has convened in the course of its life. It is instructive to consider the range of topics addressed and the territory travelled over those years. We will each have our particular memories, and for some it will be 2001 when we met here in Trinity Hall, in this very lecture theatre. The conference papers were subsequently published as *Religious Liberty and Human Rights*, including an insightful Preface from Lord Justice Sedley. Royalties from that volume assisted with the Society's finances for many years.

So against that long historical perspective, let me comment in a little greater detail on the events of the last year. Your Committee met on four occasions: on 3 May 2016, followed by a shared meal; on 1 October 2016, for a Strategy Day; on 30 November 2016, after which we adjourned to the Temple Church for Advent Carols; and on 15 February 2017, overshadowed across Dean's Yard, by the 'take note' debate in General Synod concerning the House of Bishops' paper on same-sex marriage.

During the year, the Revd Canon David Parrott resigned as Education Officer for personal reasons after many years in office and I want to record the Society's gratitude for David's work. His final act was to convene a 'Training for Trainers' event at the premises of Lee Bolton Monier-Williams in November 2016 which sought to bring together those with experience in teaching ecclesiastical law to clergy at a diocesan office. Also during the year, Dr Peter Smith relinquished the organisation of the London Lectures, passing the baton to Mark Emerton. The Society is grateful to all of them.

The main focus of the Committee's work was its Strategy Day – a morning of reflection and discussion, and an afternoon of planning, prioritising and strategising, with Eucharist and lunch in between. The Committee took stock of what has become the regular output of the Society, and noted the considerable work done by many in its delivery.

- The *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*
- The Newsletter
- The Website
- The London Lectures
- The Annual Conferences, residential in alternate years
- The Kemp Prizes for outstanding performance in Law and Religion Modules at University
- The ELS Dissertation Prize
- The Inter-Inn Mooting Competition

In addition the Committee repeated an earlier pledge to fund the Archbishops' Council's project to digitise the Opinions of the Legal Advisory Commission, a venture which was moving with glacial slowness!

Working parties were seen as crucial when the Society was created thirty years ago. They had waxed and waned in the intervening decades and pretty much dwindled to nothing eighteen months ago. These have been revived, with the Society establishing working parties to respond to consultations on various matters from both the General Synod and the Law Commission. These include:

- Enabling Measure & Statute Law (Repeals) Measure Working Party
- Church Buildings Review Group Working Party
- Law Commission Marriage Law Review Working Party
- Burial and Cremation Law Reform Working Party
- Law Commission Misconduct in Public Office Working Party

It is important that the Society makes available its collective experience to those seeking to revise ecclesiastical law. Often response times are short, and work needs to be done swiftly. To date the burden has fallen disproportionately on a few, to whom the Society is considerably indebted, but some drawn from the wider membership have assisted, as have hand-picked non-members with particular expertise. Their names appear on the individual responses which have all been uploaded onto the website. It was particularly gratifying that, during a debate in General Synod last year, Bishop Pete Broadbent paid tribute to one of the very first working parties established by the Society, namely that recommending the repeal of obsolete or redundant Acts and Measures, chaired by the late Chancellor George

Spafford. I suspect there will be more tasks for working parties in the year ahead, and I hope members will respond to the challenge and volunteer to help.

In formulating strategy the Committee focussed on the priorities for the Society for the next 3-5 years in the first instance and then, beyond that, for years 5-10. The Committee identified four matters for immediate attention with education, the Society's express charitable purpose, being front and centre. I want to spend a few moments outlining each of these priorities, although others will speak about the first two, as separate agenda items in today's AGM, reflecting the importance we ascribe to them.

i. Education

The prospect of canon law being part of clerical formation or taught at theological colleges or courses is remote. The Society needs to act so that clergy have sufficient basic knowledge of ecclesiastical law to equip them for ministry. An Education Sub-Committee has been appointed with a three year plan to work nationally in assisting in the delivery of training and in compiling a comprehensive and authoritative webpage of essential materials.

ii. Website

The Society's tired site has been revamped and modernised to facilitate the delivery of the Society's agenda for education, to keep members informed of the Society's activities, and to encourage new members to join.

iii. Governance

The Committee has reviewed the Society's governance, making adjustments and revisions to improve its efficiency and to secure compliance with charity and other relevant legislation. Work is in hand to revise the Society's Constitution which is felt to be insufficiently flexible to meet its current and future needs. As a first step, the Committee has recommended that the Society reconstitutes itself as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, and I hope the Society will give its blessing to this proposal later in today's AGM.

iv. Membership

In recent years membership has settled a little below the 700 mark. The Committee would like to see this grow. A targeted campaign, led by the Deputy Secretary, will be rolled out very soon, capitalising on the revamped website and the firm commitment to prioritising the Society's education function. Of course, if each member were to make a gift of membership to a friend or colleague, the number of members would instantly double, and the Deputy Secretary's task force would become unnecessary.

On a different note, I am pleased that this Thirtieth Anniversary Conference is being attended by many from overseas: Canada, USA, Australia, Germany, Norway and Wales, and perhaps more beside. I know from my regular appearances at conferences around the globe that the *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* is very highly regarded in the international academic world. A date has now been fixed for the Lambeth Conference in 2020, and the Deputy Chairman has agreed to liaise with the planning group to ensure space is given for

discussion of canon law. The *Principles of Canon Law Common to the Anglican Communion* was described by the Primates' Meeting as perhaps constituting the fifth instrument of unity for the Communion. When relations are fractured, and communion impaired, agreed principles of canon law around which every Province can gather may prove a welcome source of stability and insight in a fragile world.

My style of leadership, unsurprisingly, differs from that of my predecessors. I make no apology for that. I have no doubt that I am more demanding and less forgiving than those who have held the chair in the past. I have sought to professionalise the committee by having a complete paginated bundle of papers distributed two weeks in advance of each meeting, and have agitated since last October for a proper conference brochure which already seems to have found favour with participants. This – and every decision the Committee has made – has increased the administrative burden which is borne quietly and conscientiously by our Administrator, Andrew Male. Whilst I am pleased to record a modest upward variation to his honorarium, I cannot overstate the centrality of Andrew to the success of the Society – and would wish to include in these thanks, our debt to his wife, Judith, and to Sarah Neden whose assistance with the administration is never more burdensome than in the run up to the residential conference every two years; and also to Catherine Shelley and her team who carried the responsibility for the content of this year's conference here in Trinity Hall.

For me, the highlight of the residential conference is invariably the corporate Eucharist, where we gather in love and fellowship around the Lord's Table, and recall vividly that law is the servant of the Church, which equips and enables both clergy and laity to promote mission and witness in gathered communities and in world at large. This year I am delighted that the Rt Revd Christine Hardman, Bishop of Newcastle, will preside at our Eucharist. It was with the unanimous support and enthusiastic encouragement of the entire Committee that I asked her to agree to being co-opted to the Committee. Notwithstanding the weight of her responsibilities within her diocese and increasingly for the national church, Christine accepted my invitation. Whilst she cannot give the commitment one would expect of an elected member, her continuing co-option gives us the benefit of her wealth of experience and serves as an invaluable conduit between the Society and the House of Bishops. I already have cause to be thankful for her wise counsel.

The Committee is adapting to new models of working with active sub-committees, working parties and the delegation of responsibilities, ensuring that the burden of running the Society is more evenly distributed than may have been the case in the past. The achievements of the last twelve months are testimony to the commitment and sheer hard work of the Officers and the entire Committee, to each and all of whom I am indebted, as is the Society. I believe this Thirtieth Anniversary is a timely occasion for a proud and positive retrospective, but not for complacency. We have plotted a course for the future with confidence and enthusiasm. In sharing our vision, the Committee asks for your support and, above all, for your prayers.

Mark Hill, All Fools Day, 2017