

Post War Church Dynamics: Holy Trinity, Adelaide 1946-73 as a case study

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This paper builds on research for the history of a Christian congregation in a period of numerical and institutional expansion: the history of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, located on the grubby end of North Terrace, Adelaide, in a building first begun in 1838 on the town acre chosen by Colonel Light and paid for by St Leger Grenfell. The building we (for I write as both member and historian) now use was the product of a major rebuild in 1888. The first incumbent, the Reverend Charles Beaumont Howard, was also the official Chaplain to the Province of South Australia. He and his successor in both appointments, James Farrell, were Irish born and trained at Trinity College, Dublin. The tale of the establishment and growth of this congregation under the leadership of Howard and his nine successors is told in a straightforward way in my book, *Holy Trinity Adelaide: the history of a city church, 1836-1988* published by the Trustees, 1988.

In particular, can we use the events of the years 1946-1973 to explore some of the reasons for church growth? Is it possible to isolate out in a form of literary regression analysis what were the most important causes of the expansion at Holy Trinity in this post-war generation? More boldly, though only implicitly, how general was the Trinity, Adelaide, experience? What of churches with a different mix of internal and external factors? Can we continue the process of generalisation beyond this one case? That further phase of enquiry remains a challenge and a call to action

II

To assist in the analysis I will draw on the recent work by Peter Kaldor, *Who Goes Where? Who Doesn't Care?* (Sydney; Lancer, 1987), which is a study of going to church in Australia full of perceptive conceptualisations as well as some interesting survey data about religious behaviour in Australia over the last 25 years.

He presents a 'model' of the church in modern society (pp.50ff) in which he argues 'that factors shaping the local community will also significantly affect church life'. Among these he lists such matters as urbanisation, and in particular the progressive

segregation of residential resources and the changes in land use which go with it. Secondly, he refers to the changing cultural components of a local community as well as the larger Australian scene.

On the other hand he provides room for factors affecting the local church which might be labelled 'internal', and includes church traditions, the social make-up of the active constituency, the life-stages of the congregation, its theological orientation, and its leadership.

He brings these two sets of factors together and focuses on the receptivity of the local community and the openness of the local church. The former is about the religious orientation of the community and its view of the churches. The latter is about the ease with which people can enter into the life of a congregation- is it closed or open?

He concludes this model by arguing that the prerequisites on the part of congregations for connectedness between church and community are

- (1) proximity its availability and d accessibility
- (2) congruity its cultural relevance to the local context
- (3) utility its response to the religious and social needs of the community and the individuals in it.

III

Let me now go over the Trinity tale and highlight the narrative with Kaldor's model in mind, examining first the processes of growth.

The evidence of growth from 1946 to 1973 as measured by attendance, staff, income, is clear enough during the incumbencies of F.H.B ("fire, hell and brimstone") Dillon (1946-1951), Graham Delbridge. (1951-1957) and Lance Shilton (1957-1973).

The congregation shed the last of its local Adelaide city character during the 1950s and took on a regional relevance, attracting worshippers from widely separated metropolitan Adelaide It would appear that to the existing base of shopkeepers and trades people with city or near-city links were added a significant influx of skilled technical and white collar people, mostly young marrieds. The fifties were a time of rapid urbanization in Adelaide and people of that sort were at a

premium in Adelaide community.

The congregational profile retained that character during the 1900s. There were active links with Evangelical Union at the University of Adelaide which reinforced the flow of young professionals into the congregation.

Some gains occurred from the substantial inflow of British migrants to Adelaide. Trinity was to them the appropriate tribal venue to express their religious affiliation, especially if they had an established low church preference.

Generally, then, the congregation was middle class and 'Anglo-Australian' in orientation with only minority representation of the working classes, and a few cross-cultural links via South East Asian professionals in the congregation.

Notice, too, the use made of broadcasting and public controversy as a way of establishing connectedness with the Adelaide region, Dillon offered Second Coming prophecy of great urgency. Delbridge conveyed enormous openness via regular radio broadcasts which attracted hundreds to his evening services. Furthermore, he established widespread links with a variety of social organisations in the city. Shilton continued these trends, using regular radio and press columns, as well as a highly developed skill in public controversy as means to establish and maintain congruity and utility. He was also willing to baptise and marry virtually any who presented themselves, and to conduct special commemorative services at the church on behalf of a surprising variety of public organisations. These practices underlined proximity.

It is probable, however, that those organised efforts to maintain proximity, combined with the rising degree of media exposure Shilton gained, became counter-productive. Shilton's continuing search for proximity and utility clashed with the expectations of many in the congregation for supportive ministry and a growing Christian experience untroubled by such interactions between church and community. I will return to these negative issues in the next section of this paper.

On the internal side Trinity possessed a well-established congregational tradition which looked back to the colony's beginnings in the 1830s. That tradition was self-consciously low church and evangelical and

it had been tested from time to time in controversies with successive bishops of a diocese which in its Anglo Catholic tone had become, by the 1950s, one of the most monochrome in the Church of England in Australia. All three incumbents in this period emphasised the evangelical heritage of the parish. Shilton was the most forceful and well-thought out in the enunciation of this outlook.

It meant, too, some tense, difficult negotiations with the diocese over the matter of training and ordaining candidates proposed by Trinity. While the parish gained little from the intransigence of Bishop Reed, its own self-conscious identity was reinforced by the exchanges, perhaps however at the cost of some distancing from Anglicans of other traditions.

Another line of theological orientation, which Delbridge and Shilton both stressed, was the common ground shared with other Protestant congregations. This was most clearly expressed in Trinity's active participation in the Billy Graham crusades, especially of 1959. Shilton gained great respect among Methodist, Baptist and other Protestant clergy for his enormous administrative commitment to the crusade

Another important tradition which reciprocally reinforced Trinity's standing was the congregation's financial and personal support, for the major agencies of Anglican evangelical outreach the Church Missionary Society, Scripture Union and several other such Interdenominational organisations. The incumbents never ceased to urge the importance of supporting these organisations; their summer schools, visiting speakers, fund raising drives and local committees ensured that Trinity was engaged in Australia-wide or world-wide networks of activity and commitment.

The life-profile of the congregation in this period reflected the community's baby-boom years. Not only did the resource base need expanding with more paid staff to visit and marry and baptise, but the buildings were expanded to seat the congregation, to provide space for their small children to be cared for, their primary aged to be taught in Sunday school, their teenagers to meet and play. Thus the profile was expressed firmly in the expansion of physical plant relevant to the needs of family-oriented, middle-class congregation

in years of prosperity.

It also meant expanding, the administrative structures by which the congregation controlled its affairs. To some extent this was a necessary response to growth. But it was also one of Shilton's techniques to provide continuing congruity and utility to his congregation Through such organisations people could participate in ways appropriate to their skills and their needs. The civil engineers and the plumbers worked on the building committee, die teachers and academics on the education committee, the superior housekeepers on the catering committee (and its thousands of meals and tens of thousands of cups of tea), the mothers ran the crèche and so on. It was often criticised as busy-ness for busy-ness sake, and yet it was a shrewd effort on the part of the congregation's leader to keep an expanding and increasingly complex congregation engaged.

Of course, the leadership exercised by Dillon, Delbridge and Shilton was central to this whole exercise. Most Anglican history has to be written around the bishops and rectors simply because of the constitutional structure of the Anglican church. Trinity is no exception. and I have no doubt my book will be criticised for its obsession with die succession of clergy But in the years 1945-73, there can be no doubt the congregation was well-served. Dillon was in the do-it-all-yourself clerical tradition; Delbridge's personality and energy flowed in all directions, shining attractively upon the lives of all who met him; while Shilton revealed clarity of thought and administrative action combined with a naive fearlessness in his efforts to promote Trinity's interests. The pace these leaders set both challenged and satisfied the sort of people who came to Trinity. The increasingly professional middle class congregation could readily understand not only the urgent appeals of Dillon and Delbridge, but the managerial structures and physical demands made by Shilton.

Nor should we neglect the importance of the leadership those men (and some women) provided in support of Shilton. Whether in Parish Council, Finance and Building Committee or the meetings of the Trustees, that collateral leadership was crucial to the clergy and to the parish. I would especially instance the key role of the Trustees in maintaining the tradition of the congregation. Possessing as they did the power of nomination to the

incumbency, they were conscious of their importance in preserving the evangelical heritage of the parish. A succession of mature and cautious men did that with great aplomb

IV

The question now arises whether this almost unrelievedly triumphalist tale of success upon success requires qualifications. Were there factors which worked against growth in this period? We must leave aside here the further question of how the events of the 1950s and 1960s constrained the 1970s and beyond.

First, it is clear, when we consider the external factors, that urban growth could not always benefit a centrally-located parish. Many potential members, even in a mobile, car-owning community, would increasingly prefer the local option as distances grew.

Obviously, too, the economic expansion of Adelaide, attracting highly skilled migrants from England and Sydney in the 1950s and 1960s, was replaced by stagnation in the 1970s. The pool of recruits who might be attracted to Trinity was not then growing as fast as it was earlier

Again, the very Anglican-mess of Trinity would always create a barrier to other cultures and traditions: the middle class character of the congregation produced its own limits too. As the community of Adelaide gradually lost its high Englishness of the 1950s, the size of the exploitable base of such people contracted.

Thirdly, Shilton in particular, adopted a conservative moral stance in the 1960s on virtually every public issue which was taken up in Adelaide. To my knowledge not once did he act publicly to welcome social change or to challenge existing inequities in the community. He was hot against gambling and pornography and supported censorship, but he rarely spoke about the virtues of social reform, increased freedom, individual opportunity; he never addressed the wrongs of Aborigines or the difficulties of the war in Viet Nam.

Kaldor has presented data on the period 1960-1985 which suggest a major bleeding of support for the churches from the young generation of those years. It is my suspicion that Trinity shared in that loss - experienced

perhaps as a cessation of growth rather than a decline - but experienced nevertheless.

From the internal side, the strength of the evangelical tradition carried its own dangers. The frictions with the diocese, the very success of these years, the emphasis on the Protestant heritage, all defined Trinity as different from the diocese, in some way cut off from it and perhaps lacking in authority and credibility. People certainly left from time to time for this reason: or talked of Trinity as being part of the Diocese of Sydney! Trinity's image became unacceptable to many traditional Anglicans. The 'gathered' quality of the congregation, the occasional feeling of occupying the bunkers in a war with either the diocese or the community, militated against openness and connectedness from Trinity's side.

Further, many in the congregation came to criticise the organisational jungle Shilton erected. They didn't have time to criticise his two predecessors' obsessive centralisation, but Shilton's seventeen-year incumbency left plenty of time for his style of centralised control and hierarchical management style to attract criticism from thoughtful and highly trained observers who themselves were experienced in management theory and practice. In brief, people were put off by the committee system. They began to feel they were denied face-to-face, experiential Christian fellowship. The emergence of self-generated Bible study groups in homes was an obvious response to the problem of centralisation, this weakening in proximity and utility.

Not Was the rising tide of charismatic Christianity a good sign for Trinity. In some ways Trinity was one of the congregations in Adelaide in the 1950s which provided vital Christianity amidst a formalised and ineffective range of options. By the early 1970s, it and the other Protestant evangelical congregations were being outbid in the experiential stakes by the charismatic spokesmen who seemed to offer a bigger, brighter, better Christian life.

Again, I have already signalled the public controversy, designed by Shilton to defend the faith and publicise his congregation, was for many in his congregation counterproductive, lacking in utility. They came to

believe that he was taking up unimportant issues, wasting his time and energy, or even that he was wrong in his judgements. They looked for more utility in the form of pastoring and encouragement. At the very least the characteristics of the next rector were being formed in the minds of the congregation

V

In this study of church dynamics, what can we conclude were the most important factors, remembering all the while Kaldor's exhortation to grasp the interrelation of the issues?

On the outside was a rapidly growing community based still on a centralised geographic system, with a high degree of Anglo-Saxon-ness and a fairly conservative social style. On the inside was a dynamic leadership and a continuing and repeated commitment to the evangelical Christian tradition. The doctrine proclaimed was 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' over and over again. Kaldor proposes that educated professionals are more likely to be Christians than businessmen and many less skilled workers. Trinity, certainly attracted such professionals in large number as the evangelical doctrines the historic doctrines of the Christian faith, were repeatedly presented there. Out of such doctrine flowed an emphasis on personal commitment and experience which surely met Kaldor's criteria of proximity congruity and utility.

In sum, it is my conviction that the core of the success of Trinity **in** this generation in Adelaide- was its urgent proclamation and practice of evangelical Christianity. I remain to be convinced by the discussion of other examples that congregations espousing other versions of Christianity experienced such real, such sustained, such successful congregational growth in that period, or perhaps ever in Australia's history.