

GENERAL SYNOD

BRADFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD MOTION:
NAME OF DIOCESES

A background note from the Clerk to the Synod

‘That this Synod call on the Archbishops’ Council to introduce legislation to enable dioceses of the Church of England to be named by reference either to a city or substantial town or to a geographical area.’

1. In the course of the Dioceses Commission’s consultations on the Bradford, Ripon and Leeds and Wakefield Diocesan Reorganisation Scheme, it received many representations that supported the proposed new diocese but with the proviso that it should be known as ‘the Diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales’ rather than be named after a town or city in the customary way. The principal reason was that many people in the three dioceses could more readily identify with such a geographical area rather than one city within it.
2. The Commission was sympathetic to this argument but was conscious that in law and catholic ecclesiology a diocese could only take its name from the see of the diocesan bishop, but it was advised that the scheme could say:
“...the name of the new diocese is the diocese of Leeds but it may be known as the diocese of West Yorkshire and the Dales.”
3. The Commission was further advised that changing the law to enable the title of the new diocese to be ‘West Yorkshire and the Dales’ would have delayed the setting up of the new diocese. It did not feel that this would have been justified.
4. Now that the Commission’s scheme has been laid before the Privy Council (on 9 October) and is to take effect from Easter next year, it is timely to consider this motion. Members may nevertheless wish carefully to consider the basis of the current law on diocesan titles and whether there are strong grounds to resist Bradford’s motion. With this in mind, Dr Colin Podmore’s note – *Episcopal Sees and Dioceses* – which was appended to the Dioceses Commission’s October 2011 Report ‘A New Diocese for West Yorkshire and the Dales’ is attached as ANNEX 1.

Church House,
London SW1P 3AZ
.. November 2013

(signed)
Dr Jacqui Philips
Clerk to the Synod

Episcopal Sees and Dioceses

1. The term ‘see’ comes from the Latin ‘*sedes*’ (seat). In its fundamental meaning, bishop’s see is the place where he has his seat. A see is, by definition, a place (a city or town), not an area. In the case of diocesan bishops at least, that seat customarily has a physical manifestation in a church in the city or town in question. This is reflected in the formula employed in the Ordinal where, in the Consecration of Bishops, the candidate taking the oath of due obedience to the Archbishop is required to refer to himself in the following terms: ‘I *N.* chosen Bishop of the Church and See of *N.* ...’ Such a church is termed a ‘cathedral’ (or pro-cathedral) because it contains the *cathedra* (throne or teaching seat) of the bishop.
2. Legal advice tendered to the Commission¹ includes the following summary of the history of episcopal sees:

‘Canon 6 of the Council of Sardica (c. 343 AD) provided that “the sees of bishops ought regularly to be fixed in such towns only as are noted and populous”.² As Gibson notes,³ when this canon was originally made the purpose seems to have been the prevention of the unnecessary multiplication of sees. But it was subsequently understood by the canon law as requiring the placing of a bishop’s see (“or cathedral church” – in the older authorities the terms are often used interchangeably⁴) in some large or considerable town.⁵ A provincial council held by Archbishop Lanfranc, having expressly referred to the Council of Sardica and to decrees of Leo the Great and Damasus, decreed that certain episcopal sees which were situated in small towns and villages should be removed to more notable places.⁶ This rule was followed in the case of the five new bishoprics erected by Henry VIII.⁷

3. Dioceses traditionally take their name from the see of the diocesan bishop, not from the area that they comprise. The diocese is ‘the circuit of a particular bishop’s jurisdiction’. It is defined as the diocese of the Bishop of X.

Exceptions

4. In the history of the Church, there have been some exceptions to the general rule whereby all diocesan bishops should have sees.

¹ Available on the Commission’s website from www.diocom.org/background

² Gibson, *Codex Juris Ecclesiastici Anglicani* (2nd edn., 1761) p. 171.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ The references cited from Gibson are in a section of the work headed, “Rules of common and canon law concerning cathedrals as the sees of bishops”.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.* Several sees were moved as a result, including Dorchester to Lincoln, Selsey to Chichester and Crediton to Exeter.

⁷ *ibid.*

5. Sometimes this may have been because the bishop's diocese did not contain a large or considerable town.
6. In some cases the bishop was bishop of a tribe or kingdom which had recently been converted to the Christian faith, and the bishop was closely associated with a travelling royal court rather than having a fixed see. As Christianity became more firmly established, episcopal sees were generally founded in accordance with the ancient canonical norm. For example, in the 650s there were 'Bishops of the Mercians', but Chad (d. 672) established the episcopal see in Lichfield.
7. The principal example of a church where there are diocesan bishops without sees is the American Episcopal Church. When it was formed in 1789, it was established on a democratic and egalitarian basis with a different ecclesiology from the traditional catholic ecclesiology which the Church of England had inherited.⁸ The first Presiding Bishop, William White, had argued in 1782 for 'an equality of the churches; and not, as in England, the subjection of all parish churches to their respective cathedrals'. Neither cathedrals nor episcopal sees were created. Indeed, the congregations united to form not 'dioceses' but 'the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of X.'. Ordination by a bishop was a necessary prerequisite for ministry in the Episcopal Church, but state churches were not required to elect a bishop of their own. (There was no bishop in New Jersey until 1815, South Carolina until 1823 or Georgia until 1841.) A bishop was designated 'Bishop of [state]'.
 8. To facilitate the division of the Episcopal Church in New York State (by creating the Diocese of Western New York) the American canons were changed in 1838 and the state churches were designated 'dioceses', but there were still no episcopal sees and the bishops continued to be named after the dioceses rather than vice versa. In the second half of the nineteenth century American Anglo-Catholics argued that dioceses should have cathedrals and should be focused on a 'see city', in line with catholic and Anglican tradition. The first cathedrals were established in the early 1860s, but there are still around fifteen American dioceses that have no cathedral. When the Diocese of New York was further divided in 1868, the Diocese of Albany became the first to be named after a see city rather than taking its name from a state or part of a state. Building of the Episcopal Church's first cathedral on the scale of a European cathedral commenced in Albany in 1884. Since 1868 several other new dioceses have been named after see cities, and in 1886 the Diocese of Wisconsin changed its name to 'Milwaukee', but in the majority of American dioceses the bishop does not have a see and instead the bishop and the diocese are named after an area of territory.
 9. Under high-church leadership in the 1830s the American Episcopal Church began to elect missionary bishops who would go out to plant new churches (dioceses). This idea was adopted in England and missionary bishops were consecrated for work in areas where there was as yet no settled Christian community. When consecrated these

⁸ For this, see C. J. Podmore, 'A Tale of Two Churches: The Ecclesiologies of The Episcopal Church and the Church of England Compared', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 10 (2008), 34-70 and *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 8 (2008), 124-154.

bishops by definition had no see (they did not inherit a church but were commissioned to plant one) and were instead named after the area to which they were sent.

10. In other parts of the Anglican Communion, American influence or the tradition of missionary bishops have resulted in dioceses being named after an area of territory rather than after a diocesan see.

Conclusion

11. As a matter of law, and in line with traditional catholic (and Anglican) ecclesiology, an English diocesan bishop must have a see, and the diocese must take its name from the diocesan see (rather than the bishop taking his designation from the diocese).
12. English law can of course be amended. Before doing so, it would need to be considered whether removing the requirement that a bishop should have a see and instead naming the bishop after the diocese (rather than the diocese after the bishop) would represent a significant shift in the Church of England's ecclesiology and, if so, whether such a shift would be desirable.

Colin Podmore