

OUR EVANGELICAL WITNESS : (2) EXPRESSED IN THE COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH.

By THE REV. PREBENDARY SHARPE, M.A., Vicar. Rural
Dean of Paddington.

ON June 30, five years ago, a fine summer morning, Westminster Abbey saw a new departure in the History of our Church.

Bishops, Clergy, men and women from every part of England met in the quietness of expectation. It was the first corporate act of the new Church Assembly, a Eucharistic Service in which all the members present dedicated their lives afresh to the Service of the Lord Jesus Christ and offered Him their souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice to God before the Assembly met in session. It was a new beginning of life. Speaking later on that same day in the opening session of the Assembly, the Archbishop of Canterbury said; "The actual pulsing life has definitely begun." He quoted the following words:—

"There is a day in spring,
When under all the earth the secret germs
Begin to stir and glow before they bud.
The wealth and festal pomp of midsummer
Lie in the heart of that inglorious hour,
Which no man names with blessing; but
Is blest by all the world. Such hours there are."

and His Grace added, "Yes, such hours, such days there are, *and this is one of them.*" It has been pointed out that that day had an added significance; the War had ceased some eighteen months before. Two days later the Lambeth Conference was to assemble from all the habitable world to send out its message of unity to every Church and to all people. From the first the Church Assembly faced a great opportunity, up from the furnace of the war the Church was to pass on to construction and reconstruction for the Kingdom of God from within and from without the limits of the Empire, and the powers bestowed by Parliament upon the Church Assembly were to enable it the better to play its part. Indeed, it is interesting to note that while all institutions in the country *talked* about reconstruction, the eldest of them all, the Church of England, *achieved* it. The ready assent which Parliament gave to the request of the Church for fuller powers of self-government was quite remarkable. It was a generous act of trust on the part of the State and an obligation of honour is laid upon the Church to justify that trust.

The Church Assembly has now its place in the Constitution of the Church and Realm of England. Its creation marks the beginning of a new era in its history and in its relation to the State. The change that has been wrought is difficult for those to realize that have not tried to get Church legislation through the entanglements of procedure and the morass of Parliamentary obstruction. Five

years of the Church Assembly has seen more done in the way of Church reform than would probably have been done in fifty years of Parliament. But the Assembly has done more than the passing of thirteen useful Measures. It has gained a spirit of its own, yes, an *esprit de corps*; a spirit which is more easy for its members to feel than to describe. As the Archbishop of York says in his introduction to a small book entitled *The First Five Years of the Church Assembly*, to which I am much indebted in this paper: "Of course there is ample room for improvement. The ultimate constituency of the House of Laity represented by the Electoral Rolls ought to be much larger. There ought to be a larger representation of the youth of the Church, and the speakers might well put a self-denying ordinance on themselves to restrain the frequency and length of their speeches. But Parliament was not made in a day: it is not to be expected that the Church Assembly should be perfected in five years. Possibly the next five years will put the wisdom and largeness of mind of the Assembly and its relations with the old Convocations and with Parliament to a severer test. But the beginning already made justifies the hope that the Assembly will be equal to the test."

In the Church Assembly at the present time there are three Houses: (1) *The Bishops* containing the two Archbishops and thirty-six Diocesan Bishops, making thirty-eight in all; (2) *the Clergy*, who number about 313, of whom 103 are Proctors for Chapters; and (3) *the Laity*, whose numbers reach about 352, making a total membership of just over 700. The Proctors for the Clergy are elected in every Diocese by the Clergy who have a licence under seal from their Bishop. Out of the 313 Members of the House of Clergy I do not think there are more than one in five who would label themselves as belonging to the Evangelical school of thought.¹ This does not seem to me an altogether satisfactory or adequate representation. It reveals a slackness on the part of those who have votes in recording them at the Proctorial Elections. In the Diocese of London at the last election if all Evangelicals had recorded their votes it would have been quite easy to have secured a fourth representation. Over 400 Clergymen who had votes in the London Diocese failed to record them. This slackness and indifference is unpardonable and Evangelicals ought to realize their responsibility in possessing and in using their vote. It will be interesting to see the result of the election which has just taken place for the House of Laity and to find out the proportion of the Laity who are Evangelicals.

Meetings are held from time to time between the Clerical and Lay Members who hold Evangelical principles in the Church Assembly, and they confer with one another on matters which are on the Agenda for the Session. Important and useful results have followed these Conferences. It is most important that the Church Assembly should be thoroughly representative of all schools of

¹ Hence we are largely outnumbered in divisions on critical occasions such as those on the Revision of the Prayer Book.

thought in our Church, and it is to this end that we would emphasize the importance of Evangelicals taking a greater interest in the elections to both the Houses of Clergy and Laity. If we fail to get our proper representation in these bodies it is our own fault and those principles for which we stand will suffer accordingly.

But this is not all, if the Church Assembly is to be a truly representative body of the whole Church, it is necessary that much more interest and enthusiasm should be aroused in our Parochial Church Councils and Ruri-decanal organizations. The Parochial Church Councils ought to be sympathetically viewed in all our Evangelical Parishes and every encouragement given to them in their work, and their co-operation invited in all matters concerning the spread of Christ's Kingdom in the Parish, Diocese, and Overseas.

The Electoral Roll should be a living record of all Churchpeople in the Parish and every qualified Member of the Church of England should be encouraged to sign the requisite declaration. Each Member should be visited and if possible given some card or token of Membership with a Prayer printed upon it for use. A personal invitation should be sent to each Member at the time of the Annual Church Meeting, and much more made of that occasion than is usually done. It is the opportunity now given for a real interest to be shown in the spiritual life of the Parish and much can be made of it. At that meeting the Parochial Church Council is chosen and every care should be taken that the Council is thoroughly representative of the Parish and its workers, and that the young people should have a place upon it. On the numbers on the Electoral Roll of each Parish depend its representation on the Ruri-decanal Conference. The growing importance of these links in the organization must be fully appreciated. Here in the Ruri-decanal Conference Parish meets Parish and the opportunity is given for the quickening of the spiritual life and activities of neighbouring Parishes. Here again it is most important that this Conference should be treated with more regard than is often the case. Attendance at its meetings should be regarded as very important. Those representing Evangelical principles should be amongst the first to show a real interest in their proceedings. Here is the opportunity given to understand one another better and to find out one another's point of view, and to explain our position to those who may misunderstand it, or know it not. Evangelicals have failed in days that are past to make their full contribution to the life of the Rural Deanery and Diocese, and on account of this we are suffering to-day from the comparative weakness of Evangelical influence in the Church at large, and in the Church Assembly in particular. To a certain extent we are recovering from this position, but we still have much way to make. If we Evangelicals have a witness to make, a contribution to give to the life of the whole Church, then we must see that it is made in the Councils of the Church: first, in the Parish Church Council, secondly, in the Rural Deanery, and lastly in the Church Assembly.