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COMMENT



What we talk about when we talk about class: discourse about the working class in the Church of England General Synod 2018–2022

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ABSTRACT

The Church of England struggles to talk clearly about class. This article examines discourse in the Church of England General Synod to consider both the language and themes which appear when middle-class Anglicans discuss class. It is an attempt to ‘turn the gaze’ on the powerful who allude to class whilst rarely using explicit language, preferring instead to talk about ‘the poor’, ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘deprived’. The article analyses why euphemistic reference to class are a problem, using Synod as an example. It explores three recurring themes – good news stories, leadership and church history – arguing that when these themes occur the working classes are largely presented as homogenous, lacking in agency and in need of a heroic church. The article argues that a theologically robust vision is necessary for the dismantling of classism in the Church. It outlines some promising theological starting points taken from General Synod and recent theological work by working-class theologians.

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Introduction

The class composition of the Church of England has been a subject of recurrent concern in its history. Institutional anxiety, evangelistic fervour and social concern have all prompted discussion about the relationship between the church and the working classes. The *Faith in the City* report is often cited as the high point of the church’s class consciousness. It suggested, ‘the Church of England’s most enduring “problem of the city” has been its relationship with the urban working class’ (Commission 1985, 28). However, unease about the alienation of the working classes from the Church of England preceded *Faith in the City*. More recently, there are signs that social class is again on the church’s agenda. The Emerging Church vision for the 2020s imagines a ‘Church of England which fully represents the communities we serve in age and diversity’ (“Vision and Strategy”). Changes were made to the discernment process in September 2021 with the stated aim of widening access to ordination ‘particularly conscious of issues around ethnicity,

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socio-economic background, geography, and disability' (Davies 2021b, 3). Data on the social background of those entering the discernment process is now being collected to monitor social diversity trends ("General Synod Report of Proceedings February 2022" 2022, 75. Hereafter referred to as Synod month/year). In October 2022 Ministry Division commissioned research into the wellbeing of existing working-class clergy (Graveling 2022). In the context of efforts to 'increase the representation of working-class people in leadership roles' and prioritise Estates Evangelism across the church, there is an urgent need to think and talk about class (Synod, February 2022, 172). There is also an opportunity to examine the church's existing discourses around class. The church struggles to talk clearly about class. This is not an issue unique to the Church of England. The church shares wider societal confusion about class and has its own anxieties surrounding the issue.

Methodology

This article seeks to reflect on the ways 'the working class' are constructed in Church of England discussions, to examine what Anglicans talk about when they talk about class. Inspired by Nader's call to 'study up' and scrutinise 'the culture of power' I have analysed references to the working class, both explicit and implicit, in General Synod between 2018 and 2022 (Nader 1972, 289). I have analysed available Reports of Proceedings, motions, background papers and digital recordings when Synod transcripts are unavailable. This period included discussions around the establishment of the Estates Evangelism Group and motions concerning the Wealth Gap and the relationship of the Church of England with 'disadvantaged communities'. Debates on the allocation of funding, the best strategies for growth and the lack of diversity in the church were all permeated with allusions to class. General Synod gives one representation of the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of Church of England conversations about class. It was chosen as a significant national decision-making context and a locus of power, rather than as a body representative of the worshipping communities which make up the Church of England.

In the forthcoming analysis I will attempt to highlight contributions made by Anglicans who are themselves working class. However, it should be noted that the primary purpose of this article is not to explore the perspectives of working-class Anglicans – as vital and overdue as this work is – but to analyse the common representations, discursive strategies and silences, around class in church discourse. These representations are created by those with power and shaped by historic preconceptions rather than reflecting the experiences of working-class people. Scrutinising these discussions and their significant omissions may help to create more nuanced conversations about class in the future. It has been an important part of my own reflexivity as I begin doctoral research into class and gender in the church as a middle-class researcher. Learning to recognise deep-rooted classist attitudes and stereotypes, particularly those obfuscated by good intentions, is vital as I research across class lines.

Whilst I am concerned about centring middle-class perspectives, I am convinced that turning the gaze onto middle-class discourse is necessary. As Parker has argued, 'in order to resist oppression we have to name the oppression and how it operates and turn the oppressive gaze onto the oppressors themselves' (Parker 2022, 62). Without thorough self-examination the Church of England has little hope of hearing the views of those whose opinions on class and the church matter most – its working-class parishioners, members and clergy.¹

Overview

This article will begin by exploring the language that is commonly used in General Synod in relation to social class. I will argue that the language of class is largely avoided, with Synod members referring instead to ‘disadvantage’, ‘deprivation’ and ‘the poor’. I will then evaluate three themes which appear frequently in discussions around class. These themes are the sharing of ‘good news stories’ from predominantly working-class parishes, the issue of leadership and vocations and the inspiration which should be taken from church history. I will end by identifying promising theological themes in Synod which could be developed further.

Linguistic analysis

Euphemism

The most striking feature of discussions which pertain to class in General Synod is the near absence of explicit language about social class. The term ‘working class’ is used in only three of the eleven Synods over the past five years with published minutes.² Discussions of structural health inequalities, estates evangelism, the social divisions of the nation, the housing crisis, the wealth gap between rich and poor, welfare policies and the vastly differing experiences of the pandemic, all proceed without explicit references to the working classes (Synod July 2018, 315; February 2019, 580; February 2021; February 2020, 45; November 2021, 118). In this period the phrases ‘working-class community’ or ‘working-class area’ are never used. Instead, communities are described as ‘deprived’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘poor’, ‘needy’, ‘marginalised’ or ‘vulnerable’ (Synod February 2022, 40; February 2020, 346, 258, 269, 145; November 2020, 242). Non-specific references are made to ‘the excluded’, ‘those on the bottom of the heap and ‘those on the edge of things’ (Synod February 2019, 718; 729; 733). There are descriptions of ‘unlikely leaders and evangelists ... those from non-professional or unlikely backgrounds’ rather than working-class leaders (Synod February 2019, 582, 584). On multiple occasions, ‘the working class’ appear as an unnamed opposite to the middle class. There are ‘people for whom the middle-class profile of the church is alien’ and ‘cultures outside middle class norms’, rather than working-class people and culture (Nye 2019, 3). In a 2021 discussion about diversity, a member described issues caused by ‘the inequalities in society ... limited disposable income and concerns about travel and accommodation costs ... barriers relating to whether we feel that Synod is for people like us’ (Synod April 2021, 169). This is an excellent description of class oppression – structural injustice leading to both economic and sociocultural inequalities – and yet the Synod member does not name class.

The indirect references to working-class people in Synod range from relatively straightforward terms, such as ‘those of lower socioeconomic background’, to some which are more loaded (Synod February 2022, 172). Euphemistic references to working-class people regularly rely on stereotypes or signifiers such as receipt of benefits, tattoos, single-parent status, substance misuse and debt. A February 2020 debate about public health funerals is peppered with such signifiers as well as the troubling language of ‘paupers’, the ‘poor and indigent’ and the stereotype of the working classes as financially irresponsible (Synod February 2020, 263). The good intentions of this, and many other Synod discussions, are hampered by the cumulative effect of representations which are

condescending at best and, at times outright offensive. The motion, *Through His Poverty*, was introduced with a reference to '*what could be described as working-class areas, who may not have a culture of high literacy and classical music, but, nevertheless are made in the image of God*' (Synod February 2020, 346). A further member recounted their reflection that 'reintroduc[ing] the modern equivalent of the poor workhouses of the past' may be necessary (Synod February 2020, 355). In the Estates Evangelism debate one member described ministry on a social housing estate:

We want to be able to teach people how to cook with a recipe that does not include the word "ping" it ... you see mums pushing a toddler in a pram and they have got a dummy in, not a plastic thing but a 25p sausage roll, because it keeps them quiet. (Synod February 2020, 597)

Such comments need little analysis to recognise problematic classist attitudes. However, other indirect references require more consideration to see how they contribute to the overall othering and homogenising of the working classes in Synod.

Before analysing Synod discourse further, it must be established why indirect references to the working classes are a problem. If the issues which affect working-class communities and individuals are being explored in Synod, why does the explicit language of class need to be used? The most obvious negative consequence of silence around class in Synod discussions is a lack of clarity. Without explicit class language it is difficult to monitor social diversity or target funding effectively. This point was made by the 2022 Review of Lowest Income Communities Funding and SDF funding which recommended the Investment Board 'consider addressing social class more explicitly as a criterion' (Spence 2022, 8, 34). As well as the uncontentious point that clear language enables constructive discussions, silence about class has an ideological history.

bell hooks describes how in the 1980s, along with the revamped myth that everyone who worked hard could rise from the bottom of our nation's class hierarchy to the top was the insistence that the old notions of oppressor class and oppressed class were no longer meaningful. (hooks 2000, 66)

Class could have been 're-nuanced' in light of changing global economies, societies and patterns of employment (Skeggs 1997, 7). However many, in both academic and popular discourse, influenced by pervasive neoliberal ideology, argued for the decline of class (Skeggs 1997). In a purportedly classless meritocracy, the disadvantages working-class communities face are attributed to individual failings. Silence about class therefore colludes with class oppression and minimises resources available for resistance. In agreement with Beverley Skeggs:

To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it. It does not mean the women [I interviewed] would experience inequality any differently; rather, it would

make it more difficult for them to identify and challenge the basis of inequality which they experience. (Skeggs 1997, 6)

Practical theologian Katherine Turpin has touched on the way a ‘lack of critical capacity around social class’ is a theologically significant issue, not least because it causes material and psychological suffering for working-class people (Turpin 2009, 315). Working-class academic Cynthia Cruz writes about the inner experience of growing up in a world where middle-class values and tastes are the unspoken norm:

I did not know at the time *what* was “wrong” with me ... wherever I

turned, I hit yet another invisible threshold I was unable to pass through. (Cruz 2021, 11–12)

Naming class and classism is a necessary part of addressing this issue which is both an important dimension of human experience and a matter of social justice. Synod discussions however, either evade class or use language which perpetuates the very oppression it attempts to address.

As has been indicated, without the analytical framework of class, injustice is often attributed to personal moral failing. This is evident on numerous occasions in Synod, most clearly in debates around housing. In the 2021 discussions around *Coming Home* it was noted that, ‘a number of questions’ had been asked on a similar theme, including,

In the light of one of the key factors underlying the housing crisis being

the break-up of parents or the nuclear family which means that each family

straddles two homes, rather than one, shouldn’t we also be ... intentionally

working with government to invest into marriage, relationships and

parenting courses?

Rather than challenging this analysis, Archbishop Justin replied, ‘of course we should, it’s absolutely correct’ (“Proceedings Synod February 2021”). In July 2021 a member echoed this evaluation, suggesting that ‘probably the most significant cause of the housing crisis surely has to be the breakdown of the family unit’ (Synod July 2021, 256). Lisa McKenzie’s research with working-class families on the St Anne’s estate in Nottingham presents a profound challenge to this ‘broken families’ narrative. McKenzie reverses the flow of causality, describing the ‘assault on family life through the precariousness of the economy and housing policies that the poorest families in the UK have no control of’ (McKenzie 2015, 101). Synod discourse colludes with the government’s ‘problem families’ narrative rather than being in solidarity with working-class families (Crossley 2017, 22–24). The Church of England’s positionality as a wealthy landowner makes the blaming of single-parent families for the housing crisis particularly pernicious.

Defining through lack

As has been noted, the terms most commonly used for working-class communities in Synod are ‘disadvantaged’, ‘deprived’ and ‘poor’, language which defines communities through lack. In April 2021 a member asked, ‘what efforts are being made to foster

vocations amongst those people who would identify themselves as coming from a working-class background?’ Despite the clear use of ‘working class’ in this question, the respondent referred to ‘people from socially, economically and educationally deprived backgrounds’, a definition centred around deficiency (Synod April 2021, 109–110). ‘Social deprivation’ is a particularly ambivalent term which obscures the kin and friendship networks of working-class communities. These networks are valuable despite not constituting transferrable social capital. Such positive elements of working-class communities are largely missing from Synod. Working-class culture is rarely mentioned favourably. A comment made in February 2022 in a discussion about inclusion is revealing, ‘do we want middle-class behaviours ... or do we want different behaviours that we find slightly uncomfortable?’ (Synod February 2022, 236). This description of a working-class habitus as ‘different’ and ‘uncomfortable’ is stark.

While working-class culture appears infrequently in the period examined, working-class values are never mentioned. This is despite their being identified as deeply significant to many people from working-class backgrounds (hooks 2000, 146–147). When classed differences in values and taste go undiscussed it strengthens middle class normativity. Or as Williams and Brown put it, ‘if most of our churches are predominantly middle class, the chances are that we will very easily slip into believing (subconsciously, at least) that middle-class values are synonymous with Christian values’ (Williams and Brown 2022, 14). The symbolic power of the middle classes, to dominate aesthetic standards, is an important aspect of class oppression (Bourdieu 1989). In the Church this extends to the construction of theology and morality (Parker 2022, 5). If being working class is defined solely as being ‘deprived’ or lacking, conversations about class perpetuate this oppression (Harley 2023). Furthermore, the opportunity for working-class values to challenge the middle-class values embedded in the Church is lost.

Homogenising and othering

Two final issues in Synod’s euphemistic language were the tendency to homogenise and other. Using homogenising language is particularly unhelpful because the working classes have historically been described as an undifferentiated mass (Crossley 2017, 53). A question in April 2021 astutely challenged homogenising tendencies in the Church of England:

What efforts have been taken ... to ensure ... much greater engagement than at present with people who would regard themselves as working class, including those owning their own home or renting private sector accommodation, as well as those living in inner or outer estates of social housing? (Synod April 2021, 73)

This question should not detract from the importance of estate ministry, but highlight the Church of England’s inability to see working-class people when they are not living on estates. Class is relevant to every kind of parish and making class visible, sometimes hyper-visible, on estates should not be used to make working-class people invisible in all other contexts (Reddie 2018).³

The recurrent use of the term ‘the poor’ throughout the period analysed contributed to homogenising discourse. Its use is understandable given that it is shared biblical terminology, often used to evoke concepts of justice. However, ‘the poor’ is used with little specificity, conflates different forms of oppression and hides non-economic injustice. The term ‘the poor’ is not only homogenising but also othering, which Baroness Lister describes as a ‘discursive strategy that magnifies and distorts difference’ (Lister 2004, 101). ‘The poor’ evokes a historic, idealised group, a ‘them’, impossibly distant from ‘us’. There was explicit discussion of othering in Synod during the period analysed. In February 2019 Canon Zahida Mallard described, ‘Over the last few days, I have heard lots of people talk about lots of different groups and do lots of “othering”. The “othering” is here in and amongst us’ (Synod February 2019, 737). The othering that Canon Mallard identified was present throughout the five-year period under analysis. In a debate on Fresh Expressions a clergy member recounted:

I baptized an adult who came to church because they had seen a midnight mass on television. They live in social housing. These are the sort of people that, if we believe the cultural stories, should be going to a Fresh Expression and not a traditional church. (Synod July 2019, 337)

Whilst this member perhaps feels he is challenging stereotypes associated with working-class people, the phrase ‘the sort of people’ belies this. It should not surprise anyone who sees working-class people as differentiated individuals that they would favour diverse church traditions. This is not an isolated example of a working-class person being burdened with representing everyone in their community.

The othering in Synod was at times interrupted by the voices of those who have been designated others, disrupting ‘them’ and ‘us’ categories. Earlier in the February 2019 Synod Canon Mallard asserted, ‘I am from the North, lay, BAME, woman ... I am one of those marginalised people that Mark mentioned or put in a box’ (Synod February 2019, 31). The sense of distant, homogenous groups is challenged by the ‘proximate others’ who attempt to create space for a new narrative within Synod (Crossley 2017, 27). During the Estates Evangelism debate Rev’d David Tolhurst described himself as a ‘kid from a social housing estate’. His speech is, unusually, full of direct quotes from his working-class parishioners as well as his own voice (Synod February 2019, 585–587). These contributions, and others, from working-class members challenge the othering in Synod. Despite these attempts, Synod discourse frequently evokes a homogenous working class, lacking culture, values, or agency.

Thematic analysis

Good news stories

Having analysed the language used in Synod, I will now proceed to discuss three themes which appear in discussions around class. The first theme is the sharing of good news stories from working-class areas. Such good news is a necessary corrective to the cumulative effect of language describing communities as ‘needy’ and ‘deprived’. The Estates Evangelism task force has ‘[ensuring] that good news stories are celebrated’ as a key

commitment (Barrett 2023). The sub-theme of 'joy' was present in Synod, particularly in discussions around Estates Evangelism. For example, Rev Martin Gainsborough related, 'I spent six years on an estate in inner city Bristol. They were some of the happiest days of my life ... It was tough but we laughed a lot. It was joyful as well' (Synod February 2019, 607). Unfortunately, many of the good news stories shared in this period do little to improve representations of working-class people. In most, working-class church members and parishioners are the objects of care and ministry, rather than agents. Whilst the church is presented as creative, resourceful, 'a beacon of hope' and 'brimming with compassion', working-class people and communities are 'grim', hopeless and broken (Synod February 2020, 263; July 2019, 126). In a discussion of children and youth ministry in February 2019 one member commended residential summer camps.

young people from some of our neediest communities have joined us ...

For some, it is the first time a meal is shared round a table ... For some,

it is cleaning their teeth for the first time on a regular basis ... As one

young person said to me, "This is the one place where I find stability

and love." (Synod February 2019, 557)

The young people in this story are unnamed and largely undifferentiated objects of pity. The paternalistic tone is underlined by repeated implications of poor parenting. When narratives do name working-class parishioners they are rarely the heroes, or even the agents, of their own story. A contribution to a debate about Youth Violence named Jeffrey:

He struggled to control his anger, he was only ten years old. One of the

youth workers from my church spends an hour a week doing this guy's

favourite thing, which is drawing pictures ... He tried to take this boy

home. His mum was not in, still at work ... so, this boy went to the home

of another family from the local church ... And when mum came back, it

materialised that there was no food in the fridge, so this same family fed

them a meal and in the midst of the chaos read from the Bible. (Synod July 2019, 125–126)

In this story Jeffrey and his mother are passive recipients while the church family and youth worker actively embody Christian virtues of generosity and hospitality. It is possible that the youth worker and family are also working class, but this is unstated. Instead, the story reflects a heroic church paradigm explored by Harley and Barrett in *Being Interrupted* (Barrett and Harley 2020, 68–74).

One good news stories in the Estates Evangelism debate which did portray working-class people with agency was shared about young people in a Newcastle parish.

They said, "We hope you are not deciding what we need without us".

Committee members came and went, but the people who never left are

the young people who kept on and on at us, “Do not leave us alone.

These are the things that we need, can you help us get on with it?” (Synod February 2019, 598)

In this story, the young people take a central position, while the church is asked to assist. There is an attempt to recreate their voices carefully, capturing tenacity and leadership. Despite its merits, this story still ended with the disempowering trope of the heroic church as rescuer. The member concluded, ‘I want to end with what a young person said to me not long ago in Byker, “Please don’t leave us”’ (Synod February 2019, 599). In Bishop North’s closing remarks for this debate he chose to reinforce these words. ‘I think we need to hear that child speaking to us as a Synod today, “Please don’t leave us”’ (Synod February 2019, 615). His substitution of ‘child’ for ‘young person’ adds to the sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Considering embedded paternalistic attitudes, the most fitting challenge from Byker would have been, ‘We hope you are not deciding what we need without us’.

A final risk in good news stories is that they can be shared instrumentally, diminishing the personhood of working-class people. Rev’d Luke Lerner, has stated, ‘Sometimes, it can feel that the working-class are used as pawns in the narratives of different interests within the Church of England’ (Davies 2021a, 22). Such instrumentalism is unmistakable in the story quoted above of the man baptised having viewed Midnight Mass on the television (Synod July 2019, 337). Its central point was the undervalued role of sacramentality within Fresh Expressions, rather than the man’s profound transcendent experience. Later in the same debate, a member defending very different churchmanship evidenced the same instrumentalism. His ‘heart-warming’ story described an unnamed woman who had become a church ministry assistant. He concluded, ‘This would not have occurred, humanly speaking, if we had not launched out with that initiative of Sunday at Three’ (Synod July 2019, 342). The woman is side-lined in her own faith story, with her conversion attributed to a church member who invited her, an evangelistic course and the church plant itself. Talking about others is an unavoidable part of storytelling however this needs to be approached with much more care in the church. There is a lack of personhood conferred when good news stories are used in this reductive manner merely as ‘evidence’ in a debate which concerns church tradition, politics or strategy.

Leadership and vocations

The second recurring theme pertaining to the working classes in Synod is the importance of leadership and vocations. The lack of working-class leaders is identified as a key explanatory factor for the perception of the church in the Through His Poverty debate (Synod February 2020, 345–361). More than half of contributors to the Estates Evangelism debate raised the issue as an urgent priority (Synod February 2019, 580–616). One working-class member of Synod noted, ‘It can feel very patronising in a community to ship in a middle-class person who thinks they understand how it is to live the daily lives of the people in this community’ (Synod February 2019, 592–593). Member questions were posed about the social class backgrounds of clergy and ordinands in 2020, 2021 and 2022. The July 2022 review of SDF spending suggested that projects could have their sustainability judged on whether local leadership was being encouraged, ‘particularly in relation to

social class' (GS2261, 37, 45). Considering the importance and ubiquity of this issue, it is worth considering whether discussions challenge or reinforce the stereotyping of working-class people.

A significant tension in conversations about working-class leadership and vocations is the issue of ordination training. In the period analysed, multiple members raised concerns that the dominance of academic training, often in higher education institutions, was exclusionary to working-class candidates. For example, Rev Martin Gainsborough reflected on his Diocese's attempts to, 'grow leaders locally, and to offer training that is appropriate for different life experiences and different contexts' (Synod February 2019, 608). At the surface level such contributions make similar arguments. However, differences in emphasis differentiate those who challenge the middle-class norms of the current system and those who perpetuate stereotyped, homogenous representations of working-class candidates. Some members questioned which kinds of experience, qualifications and knowledge are considered valuable by the Church. Others suggested that notions of 'suitability' are shaped by classed values, perpetuated by biased gatekeepers. As Emily McDonald stated, 'many people are turned away purely because they do not fit in this box' (Synod February 2019, 593). However, the phrasing of other recommendations for alternative pathways subtly invoked the prejudice of the working classes as unintelligent. Some members referred to this stereotype directly: 'Poverty can often be equated to a lack of education, but that does not mean they are thick' (Synod February 2020, 359). Eve Parker's research with Church of England ordinands identified a paradox in the experience of working-class ordinands:

When we consider the dominant gaze in theological education in relation to class, it is important to recognize that on the one hand the working class will be more visible as a result of stereotyping and the low expectations placed upon them by preconceived prejudices, and on the other hand, invisible and overlooked. (Parker 2022, 63)

The issue of ordination training was highly visible in Synod, but discussions regularly patronised and homogenised working-class candidates. Members failed to adequately address the entrenched middle-class culture of theological colleges which create an 'unfamiliar' and 'hostile' environment for working-class candidates. Parker's research suggests that much more attention should be paid to broader issues which inhibit working-class candidates' thriving, rather than just teaching or assessment styles (Parker 2022). Even when discussing issues relevant to working-class candidates, Synod discourse was influenced by class prejudice and did not reflect the priorities of working-class candidates themselves.

A further limitation of conversations around working-class vocations was instrumentalism. In the period analysed, multiple contributors presented working-class leaders as a solution to the issue of low church attendance in working-class areas. For example, 'It is often those from estates who are best able to minister and serve on them'; 'The most effective people for reaching communities are people from that community. We want to make that possible' (Synod February 2019, 586; February 2020, 348). These reflections are not untrue, but they present working-class leaders instrumentally; they are 'effective'

and ‘best able’ rather than gifted and called. Furthermore, they imply working-class priests are only suited to minister in their own cultural context, less deployable than their middle-class counterparts. Whilst there are numerous gifted working-class priests ministering in estate parishes, assumptions ought not be made about a candidate’s vocational calling due to their class background.

Church history

Having considered good news and working-class leadership, the final theme to be explored is church history. Historic examples were regularly cited in Synod when discussing the relationship between the Church of England and the working classes, these were remarkably thematically coherent. From the Anglo-Catholic lineage of church planting, Bishops David Sheppard and Cyril Garbett, William Booth and William Temple, these examples are ‘amazing’, visionary, heroic (Synod February 2019, 599–601, 719; February 2020, 349–350; July 2021, 348; November 2021, 123, 126). In the Estates Evangelism debate a member suggested, ‘The passion and energy of our forebears brought pride to these new estates’ when they were built (Synod July 2021, 601). Church history thus reinforces the paternalistic sense of the grateful working classes being passively ministered to by heroic priests. The most troubling aspect of these narratives is their omissions. Despite the injunction to be a ‘humbler’ Church which came mid-way through the period analysed, no contributors mentioned negative aspects of the historic relationship between the church and the working classes. Synod contributors counselled, ‘There are lessons to be learned from our recent past’, ‘let us not forget the lessons of the past’ and ‘we again need to walk backwards into the future’ (Synod February 2019, 601; February 2020, 350; November 2021, 126). However, the picture of the past constructed in Synod was so selective that few ‘lessons’ could be learned.

As has been seen, multiple Synod members recommended changes to ordination training to remove barriers for working-class leaders (Synod February 2019, 593, 589–590, 608). However, they made no mention of attempts to make similar changes in the past. The Southwark Ordination Course of the 1950s and 60s was highlighted in the background paper to *Through His Poverty*, ‘it probably served to distance [candidates] from their cultural origins rather than embed working-class culture in the church’ (Nye 2019, 2). The Knutsford test school innovatively trained 675 men from working-class backgrounds following the First World War, 435 of whom went on to be ordained. These ordinands faced vicious criticism of ‘a lowering of standards’, accused of behaving like men rather than gentlemen (Mews 2004, 445). In 1899 Rev Anthony Deane complained about the growing proportion of clergy from more diverse backgrounds:

In former times one could safely assume that a clergyman was by birth and education a gentleman, but such an assumption is no longer possible ...

The farmer’s and the shopkeeper’s sons are sent to theological college, and then ordained too often, one fears, with the hope of thereby achieving a rise in social scale. (Mews 2004, 436)

He contended that ‘those who are ordained are inferior both socially and intellectually to their predecessors’ (Mews 2004). Those working to ‘improve access’ for working-class candidates ought to be mindful of the side-lining, scorn, and outright hostility that many of their predecessors faced. Without addressing middle-class dominance, working-class candidates will again be forced to assimilate or encounter a glass ceiling as they enter the vocations process.

Historic evangelistic efforts were regularly commended in Synod without acknowledgment of the Church’s ambivalent motivations. Concerns to ‘civilize’ the working classes and institutional anxieties were key motivations for Victorian church planting (Skeggs 1997, 43). In 1874 J.J. Halcombe argued, ‘the greatest problem which the Church has to solve ... of which her very existence as an Established Church probably depends, is, how are we to deal with these vast masses of our town population?’ (Stratford 2008, 39). Stratford’s analysis of the urban priests formed by the Oxford Movement identifies much that is laudable, but also demonstrates prevalent paternalism. Father Burn is described by Stratford as ‘one of the most paternalistic of all Ritualists’. A clergy colleague remembered Burn thus,

He used to say that in dealing with very simple and ignorant people, the only plan was to tell them exactly what they were to do, and see that they did it. “It is the method they are accustomed to in the factories, and you cannot expect them to understand anything else.” (Stratford 2008, 54)

Such attitudes are distasteful to recount, but instructive when listening for any echoes in contemporary discourse. Mews has identified the imperialism and chauvinism in the public-school missions at the turn of the twentieth century. These took young gentlemen into the London slums which were seen as ‘crucial sites for the demonstration of Christian manliness’ (Mews 2004, 438). The description of social housing estates as ‘the ideal training ground for all leaders’ in Synod sounds uncomfortably resonant of this discourse (Synod February 2019, 614). Acknowledging the mixed motives of historic evangelistic efforts will foster improved reflexivity in contemporary practitioners.

A particularly pernicious attitude in light of church history is the exoticising of working-class communities. What has been called ‘domestic colonialism’ was pervasive in the church’s domestic mission efforts (Crossley 2017, 17). William Booth, cited as an inspirational figure in Synod, exemplifies this disturbing racist and classist mindset in his *Darkest England and the Way Out*. Booth described home mission as ‘rescue expeditions to free the miserable wanderers’ (Crossley 2017, 19). Steeped in colonial ideology he contended, ‘As there is a darkest Africa, is there not also a darkest England?’ He differentiated between ‘two tribes of savages’ amongst the working class, ‘the human baboon and the handsome dwarf ... the vicious, lazy lout and the toiling slave’ (cited in Crossley 2017, 18). Such domestic colonialism problematises the frequent description of working-class, local leaders as ‘indigenous’ (For example, Synod February 2019, 592; Synod April 2021, 110).⁴ Furthermore, it forcefully demonstrates that addressing classism in the church is inextricably linked with a commitment to address structural racism.

Theological reflection

The discussions around class in General Synod lead to broader theological questions. Does the Church of England have a theological motivation for considering class? What biblical, doctrinal and ecclesiological foundations are cited and are they distinctively Anglican? In conversations around class diversity, anxieties about church decline are clearly a factor but some contributors do elucidate theological underpinnings. In comments pertaining to Estates Evangelism Rev Kate Wharton asserted, 'If we are missing any particular group, then our Church, our community, our family, our theology and our voice are diminished' (Synod February 2019, 607). This was echoed in a debate on *Setting God's People Free*,

So many of our churches have such inbuilt levels of unconscious bias
that they do not see how they exclude those on the margins from
following their calling and being the people of God they have been
called to be. We – Christ's body in the world – are all poorer for it.

(Synod July 2019, 359)

This compelling rationale is recognisable from Rowan Williams who argues,

what is bestowed on each of us is particularity, one utterly distinct way of being Christlike. If that one distinctive way of being Christlike is frustrated or denied, then something in God's communication to the world is frustrated and denied. (Cited in Highton 2008, 161)

As well as this picture of diverse flourishing as the people of God, the parish system was cited multiple times in the period analysed as a motivation towards greater community engagement. In July 2021 a member admonished that too often there was a functional congregationalism in the Church of England, whereas 'our theology says we exist to serve all in our parishes' (Synod, July 2021, 343). Bishop Nick Baines similarly argued for the significance of the parish, describing the 'obligation to territory' as 'the unique Anglican vocation' (Synod November 2021, 125). The need to value and reflect the diversity of each parish is a promising Anglican motivation for greater class engagement. However, there is a subtle difference between existing to 'serve all in our parish' and belonging to all in the parish. The significance of the parish system would therefore need to be developed cautiously, mindful of the paternalism of much Church of England discourse.

A foundational theological theme which must be developed in relation to class is justice (Rieger 2013). Whilst nascent conversations around class diversity were visible in Synod, the issue of justice was conspicuously absent in connection to class. As activists continue to fight for recognition that racism, ableism, misogyny and homophobia are justice issues, so the church's historic relationship with the working classes points to the urgency of recognising classism as a matter of justice. Developing this theological theme is beyond the scope of this article. However, the recent volume *Confounding the Mighty* engages deeply with the theological dimensions of class. In this intersectional collection Luke Larnier and other contributors proceed from a robust justice orientation, with theological critiques of issues recognisable from my analysis of General Synod. Harley argues that to characterise communities 'solely or primarily by scarcity is to assume

there are limits on where and how the underlying giftedness of God's creation is expressed' (Harley 2023, 33). Stone's analyses 'colonial notions of Christian leadership' which 'still [haunt] some aspects of Christian imagination' (Stone 2023, 70). Larner presents organising as a *missio Spiritus* and calls prophetically for solidarity. My analysis of General Synod identifies just how prescient this theological challenge is to the Church of England.

Conclusion

There are attempts to acknowledge and address the middle-class predominance of the Church of England, reflected in General Synod in the past five years. Recent member questions have displayed an encouraging awareness of class. The centrality of diversity to the Emerging Church vision suggests the issue will receive ongoing attention. Conversations about class in Synod are currently hampered by the reticence to name the working classes and a failure to discuss working-class culture or values. Discourse largely perpetuates homogenous and negative representations of the working classes, while recurring themes betray embedded stereotypes and paternalistic attitudes. Misleading representations of church history give little indication of the roots of these attitudes and underplay the need for institutional repentance. Research recently undertaken with working-class clergy will reveal the extent to which these findings from Synod are reflective of wider experiences within the Church of England (Jagger and Fry 2023).

Alongside developing greater class competency, the Church should reflect on the institutional anxiety which so often drives the instrumentalising of the working classes. The issue of class touches on wider theological questions which were underexplored in Synod. A theologically robust vision is vital if classism is to be addressed with the commitment it deserves. Confronting classism in the Church of England will include both acknowledgement of past and present harm and recognition of the joy and growth which could come if each member belonged in their full personhood and each community could contribute its particular gifts. The existing working-class leaders and members of the Church of England have persevered in an environment which often frustrates and denies their authentic Christlikeness (Higton 2008, 161). However, many have forged authentic, sustaining identities for themselves as working-class Anglicans. They are well placed to lead the creative theological work which must accompany the dismantling of classism in the Church.

Notes

1. For work which does centre working class voices see Cowan (2022), Larner (2023) and Jagger and Fry (2023).
2. Minutes for February 2021 not taken and for July 2022 unpublished at time of writing.
3. I am grateful to Ruth Harley for helping me think through this issue.
4. See Aldous et al. (2022) and Stone (2023).

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