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# Clergy are 'more like Old Labour than New'

A survey commissioned to support debates on the future of the C of E yields some interesting results, says *Linda Woodhead*

THE clergy of the Church of England are a unique tribe. Having lived and worked among them for extended periods, I long suspected this might be true. Now, thanks to a new survey designed with YouGov, I know just how true it is.

The survey was commissioned to support our new series of debates on the future of the Church of England. In order to avoid any bias, it was informed by a reference group drawn from across the Church. It was completed by 1509 Church of England clergy aged 70 and under.

The results indicate that it is representative of all churchmanships. When asked where they fall on a spectrum from Evangelical to Catholic, roughly a third of clergy say they are at the Evangelical end, a third at the Catholic end, and a third in the middle.

On a theologically liberal-to-conservative scale, 43 per cent place themselves at the liberal end, 32 per cent in the middle, and 24 per cent at the conservative end. About a third of respondents are female, and about third are under 55.

Two things unite this tribe. First, faith in a personal God. Second, faith in the parish system (News, 10 October).

The tribe is also marked by distinctive ethical and political attitudes. One of the most surprising, given that it is not official church teaching, is opposition to the current abortion law: 16 per cent support an outright ban on abortion, and 43 per cent would like to see a

reduction in the 24-week time limit. By contrast, only six per cent of all Anglicans, and the same proportion of the general population, want a ban.

On euthanasia, however, the clergy are the inverse of other Anglicans and the population as a whole. Whereas three-quarters of the latter groups favour a relaxation of the law, almost the same proportion of clergy (70 per cent) think that it should remain unchanged. There is also some variance on same-sex marriage: 51 per cent of clergy think it is wrong, compared with

47 per cent of all Anglicans, and 37 per cent of the population.

But whereas the clergy are to the right of the population in ethics, they are to the left in politics: Old Labour rather than New. "I thought I was looking at UKIP," said a friend of mine scanning the survey data, "until I got to the politics bit."

The left-lean is particularly evident in the clergy's overwhelming commitment to a generous welfare state. They are three times as likely as the general population to think that the welfare budget is too low and should be increased (44 per cent of clergy, 15 per cent of the population). Similarly, less than a third of clergy think that the current welfare system creates a culture of dependency, compared with three-fifths of the population, and more than two-thirds of Anglicans.

The clergy are also more positive

— and completely opposed to UKIP — in their attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism. On the other hand, perhaps underlining their own sense of difference from wider society, a surprisingly high proportion of clerics (51 per cent) believe that Christians today are being discriminated against, by the Government and others, and by equality legislation.

Overall, then, Church of England clergy are distinguished from "the people" by slightly more conservative moral attitudes and, above all, by their strong commitment to God and to a generous system of universal welfare. They uphold a vision of society in which all are housed and provided for, irrespective of their deserts — just as the clergy themselves are.

**Clergy are to the right of the people in ethics, but to the left in politics'**

So far, so united. But, as well as these areas of convergence, there are divisions. The most important is between the third of clergy at the Evangelical end of the spectrum and the other two-thirds.

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For example, a full 88 per cent of Evangelical clergy think that same-sex marriage is wrong; and they make up more than half of the 16 per cent of clergy who want an outright ban on abortion.

Most striking of all, however, is the way that male clergy at the Evangelical end of the spectrum differ about how to disagree. When asked what sort of unity they consider appropriate for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion (separate questions, but similar answers are given to both), most of the "middle" and Catholic clergy (73 per cent) agree that the goal is: "Maintaining unity by being more tolerant of diverse views", and 61 per cent of Evangelical women agree.

But most of the Evangelical clergy don't think this is a goal worth pursuing. One third think that the Communion should "separate amicably", and half think that greater uniformity should be imposed on everyone.

So much for facilitated conversations aimed at "disagreeing well". For the majority of Evangelical clergymen, the enterprise is misguided from the start.

Linda Woodhead is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University, and organiser of the Westminster Faith Debate series on "The Future of the Church of England".

All the figures, unless otherwise stated, come from YouGov plc. Total sample size: 1509 Anglican clergy. Fieldwork undertaken between 14 August and 9 September 2014. The survey was carried out online. Figures for lay Anglicans and the general population come from a survey carried out by YouGov for Westminster Faith Debates in July 2013.

