

Communal Ministry

Towards the Ministry of All

Jimmy Hamilton-Brown makes a plea for structural change in the way the Church identifies leaders for its ministry.

In December 2009 I wrote a letter to The Times suggesting that the way forward for the Church of England faced with a shortage of stipendiary clergy was to understand afresh what it means to be “the Body of Christ”. I received huge support from all over the British Isles. I have been saying for the whole of my ministry, over 50 years, that the C of E *appears* only to recognise the ministry of those who have been ordained. The clergy are being given more and more parishes to care for, and their ministry is being spread more thinly over the country.

BACK TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

It is time we got back to the style of ministry suggested by the New Testament. This makes it clear that ministry is the vocation of the whole people of God. Ministry is thus the task of every Christian. The calling of the presbyter (priest to use popular terminology) in the New Testament is not to do everything, but to plan, pray, teach, think and coordinate the working of the church: not by being the manager of an organisation, but by being a leader and enabler of a Christian community. (See for example Ephesians 4 9-16 & 2 Timothy 2 2)

This should not result in a few hard-pressed church members becoming overburdened because we understand that ALL Christians are called to ministry, both inside and outside the church. The authorisation for this ministry is not ordination, or some sort of diocesan licensing, but baptism. (See 1 Corinthians 12)

WILL WE NEVER LEARN?

It is not a new problem. I have been re-reading the report issued in 1945 “**Towards the Conversion of England**”. Since that time the church has shrunk in numbers and influence. Included in the recommendations in that report is this statement: “*Without the participation of the laity the conversion of England is impossible*”. Even in those days the Commission was lamenting the shortage of stipendiary clergy. (Only 17,000 to cover a population of 38 million – we now have about 8,000 to cover a population of 52 million.)

This report went on to make clear: “*The inalienable right and duty of the laity to take its full part in the spiritual (underlining mine) work of the Church, finds forceful expression all down the Church’s history.....The early church made full use both of its laymen and women.....The Reformation re-established the right of the laity to the ‘priesthood of all believers’ But speaking generally the Church of our generation, both in its thinking and practice, has departed from God’s ordained means of extending His Kingdom. The result as ever has been failure and frustration.*”

THE MINISTRY OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

More recently the Faith and Order Advisory Group produced a paper “**The Mission & Ministry of the Whole Church – Biblical, Theological & Contemporary Perspectives**” This included a useful summary on the practices found in the New Testament with an outline of how this developed into the threefold ministry of bishops, priest and deacons. It

then goes on to point out that mission and ministry need to be taken together. It warns us of the danger that the ministry of the laity can be seen as anything that is done by Christians, and points out that ministry needs to be seen, not just in terms of individuals exercising what they see as their particular gifts, but as part of the ministry of the whole church. They state *“Ministries are complementary; they enrich and support each other....You cannot ‘go solo’ in ministry or act as though ‘I have no need of you’ (1 Cor 12 21).* For ministry to be biblical it should be seen as part of the work of the church; and the ministry of individual Christians should be recognised by the Christian community.

Most clergy are only too happy to involve lay people in finance, fabric & fêtes but until we realise that ALL Christians receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and therefore have gifts for spiritual as well as material ministry, the church will continue to shrink.

DIOCESAN INITIATIVES

Most, if not all, dioceses appear to take the idea of collaborative ministry seriously, each with their own approaches and initiatives. The most explicit and progressive that I have come across so far is Ely with their policy specifically stating *“We recommend that local ministry teams become the normal (underlining mine) means through which mission and ministry are undertaken in the parishes and communities...”* The Bishop of Huntingdon however does point out that the way people understand this policy differs, from being Vicar’s helpers, or a team led by the vicar, to actual shared leadership. The diocese of Oxford is also taking the matter seriously, developing a policy that in the long term specifically involves laity as well as clergy in ministry teams.

This appears on the surface to be encouraging, but many of those who responded to my original letter were frustrated laity, who felt inhibited

by their local clergy. Progress in this style of ministry is slow and very patchy; depending largely upon the outlook of individual bishops and incumbents. Dioceses should not be put off the principle of shared local ministry just because some of the earliest Local Ministry Schemes proved too bureaucratic.

A WAY FORWARD

One retired suffragan wrote supporting my original letter and added *“Church leaders too still seem to see the church as it was when one man ran one parish, and they go on adding parishes still expecting it to be run for the most part in the traditional way. Where, I ask myself is the vision and the courage to have a new approach...?”*

Prof A.T.Hanson pointed out in his book “A Pioneer Ministry” that in the New Testament the apostles, who were pioneer missionaries, fairly quickly appointed local church leaders and moved on. They did not hang on to leading all the churches themselves; if they had done, the Faith would not have spread so quickly.

Every church must have leadership, just as every human body needs a head. But does that leadership really have to be focused in one individual incumbent? To get this new style of ministry off the ground could bishops perhaps cease appointing priests to traditional incumbencies?

If New Testament practice is followed it is appropriate to appoint *teams* of people, in our situation laity as well as clergy, to lead a church. Teams could therefore include Licensed Lay Ministers (Readers) and other suitable mature lay people, such as Churchwardens and Lay Pastoral Assistants, but also those with no pre-existing role or status in the local church. Each individual church, as well as the benefice, needs to have acknowledged leadership. Parishes could be grouped together as at present, each with their own leaders

supported by a priest, who is appointed specifically in order to “oversee”, encourage and support the work of these local leaders, in their various communities. It needs to be made clear that the role of this priest is now mainly to support and facilitate the work of these local ministers, as part of the ministry of the whole congregation.

Local Ordained Ministers, Self-Supporting Ministers, energetic retired clergy, and house-for-duty ministers should also be seen as part of ministry teams, and not as individuals ministering on their own. Often the presence of clergy inhibits lay ministry and tends to perpetuate the idea that it is ordination which authorises for ministry, rather than Baptism. As a result many lay people still have the impression that they should sit back and allow the ordained clergy to do the work of ministry as in the past.

So why cannot bishops, in full consultation with the local churches, appoint leaders for every church, on the understanding that they are *not* to be like the old fashioned incumbent trying to do everything themselves, but work with the whole Christian community in ministering to everybody? John Cole, a member of the Parish & People editorial group, suggested that rather than thinking in terms of Lay Ministry it would be helpful to describe this as “**Communal Ministry**”.

DIFFICULTIES

There appear to be at least four problems that need to be faced if the Church is to take communal ministry seriously.

1. Many parishioners (not mainly the churchgoers) still expect the clergy rather than laity to represent the church. On the increasingly rare occasions when they expect ministry from the Church (e.g. at a time of bereavement), a visit from a lay person does not normally count.

2. The present structures of the C of E appear to contradict any collaborative way of working. The clergy are still seen to be the key to everything.
3. Some clergy are either unwilling, or find it impossible, to share ministry with the laity.
4. Several clergy I know are trying hard to implement lay ministry but find great difficulty in getting church members to take up their shared responsibilities.

There are no easy solutions to this fourth problem but I have two suggestions which may help.

- a. Never ask for volunteers! Jesus never did – he called people by name to follow.
- b. And do not necessarily call upon the pillars of the church – many of them have enough on already, and there is no point in overloading those already active in one way or another. If the Body of Christ means anything, it implies that everyone has a part to play.

Some clergy, while agreeing that this collaborative style of ministry may be the way forward, do not know how to set about doing it, or find themselves incapable of escaping from their own, or other people's, expectations. I have been surprised that some women priests find it just as difficult to share ministry with others as men; perhaps this is because of the way they themselves were treated before ordination.

My own experience I fear may be typical. A church begins to understand this style of ministry involving laity as well as the clergy. Then along comes a new incumbent who does not understand, and back the congregation goes to the old way of thinking and working. I read recently of a monthly Family Service which was frequently led by a competent lay team, but which ran downhill and then stopped after

being taken over by the clergy. It has now been replaced by yet another eucharist.

I am convinced that there is no better way of helping Christians to grow than to involve them in ministry. I discovered this to be particularly true of married couples who appreciated being called to do things together. Part of the commitment to this ministry involved us in a regular meeting for prayer, Bible Study and talking through the local situation.

Addressing the local situation may be a key. Apart from the pastoral care of a limited number of individuals, ministry is too often expressed as activity in and around the church building, or amongst the worshipping community. The community of Christ's disciples needs to be seen to be far more active outside the church gates, getting alongside people as they face the complex issues of daily living. All this is too big a task to be left to stipendiary ministers – or to lay people operating on their own.

If we are to be seen to be *discerning what God is doing in God's world, and joining in* (paraphrasing John V Taylor in 'Go-between God'), only a communal effort by the whole of God's people – across all Christian traditions – will be enough.

TIME FOR ACTION

In the last century the Rev. Roland Allen, a missionary with SPG, came up against a brick wall when advocating the importance of a local ministry – as can be seen from his letters to church leaders worldwide. He states that when he was an incumbent *"he learned the waste of spiritual power which our restrictions involve."*

It is clear from the reading list at the end of this briefing that this style of ministry, which goes back to the New Testament, has been on the church's agenda for over 60 years, with little progress. We have spent

several decades discussing the ordination of women, but the place of the laity in ministry has, by and large, been ignored – or left to a few prophetic enthusiasts. *“Prophets and administrators have a customary difficulty in understanding one another,”* writes Canon David Paton in his biographical essay of Roland Allen.

It is my opinion that this ministry of the whole Christian community, the Body of Christ, will not take off and flourish until it becomes the recognized policy of each bishop and diocese.

Dioceses, like parishes, are very different, and each will need to discover their own way forward. Some years ago Bishop Michael Marshall wrote:

“Only an episcopate stripped of its prelacy, and a priesthood stripped of its clericalism, can really set the laity free from churchiness, and help them be the priestly people of God, for the sake of the whole world.”

Of course it is up to the bishops, synods, and the lawyers to sort this out. That will take years! But some courageous and visionary bishops could start doing it now. Church leaders in other denominations must also not be left out of the conversation; their members are also part of the ‘whole people of God’ with whom ministry is shared. In that way we may discover what works and what does not; before someone designs the legislation.

If your bishop were to do this, how would you feel? It is just the sort of item that deanery synods should be considering. The recent P&P Briefing *“I am a churchgoer ... Get me out of here!”* could well provide a suitable starting point with its suggested quiz. (Powerpoint slides are available free on the P&P website)

Then your synod might forward a motion or suggestions to the bishops and the diocesan synod to encourage them to think towards Communal Ministry.