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Towards a Theology of a Local Ordained Ministry

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Inadequate Foundations

The main development of a non-stipendiary ordained ministry (NSM) in the Church of England took place during the two decades 1960-80. A theological green light was given by the 1958 Lambeth Conference:

The Conference considers that, while the fully-trained and full-time priesthood is essential to the continuing life of the Church, there is no theological principle which forbids a suitable man from being ordained priest while continuing in his lay occupation.¹

This statement was made in a resolution under the heading, 'The Supplementary Ministry'. But in what sense was the word 'supplementary' understood? In a symposium published in 1960, F. R. Barry spelt out the double application:

My interest in a supplementary Ministry is . . . primarily theological. If some of those laymen who are sharing in the priestly ministry of the Church through their secular professions and avocations were ordained to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, that would, I suggest, provide an important object lesson in what is really meant by the Church . . . Primarily the Ministry of such men would be fulfilled in the jobs they were doing . . . But they could greatly assist the parish clergy in such liturgical and pastoral functions as they could undertake in their leisure time . . . What I am suggesting is a priesthood (equal in authority and commission with that of the whole-time priests whom we know now) which would be exercised and fulfilled partly, or mainly, in 'secular' employments, partly in supplementing the whole-time Ministry.²

As the supply of candidates for stipendiary ministry fell steeply during the sixties there was increasing practical pressure to regard the development of non-stipendiary ministry as a means of maintaining the parochial ministry. For a time the preferred title became 'Auxiliary Pastoral Ministry' (APM). There was loose theological talk about 'tentmaking' ministry, as though, after the supposed example of the apostle Paul, those ordained to the non-stipendiary ministry remained in secular employment solely as a means of providing support for their church-based work. This seriously

1 The Lambeth Conference 1958, Resolution 89.

2 R. Denniston, ed, *Part Time Priests?*, Skeffington, London 1960, p 13f.

devalued the theological and vocational significance of their secular occupations (as well as suggesting to their employers that they had lost interest in their jobs).

Because NSM priests were wanted as a support for the stipendiary ministry the Bishops' Regulations of 1970, by a process of assimilation, insisted upon equivalent standards of selection and training. There could be no second-class priesthood, because the vocation was the same. Two consequences inevitably followed. First, a very high percentage of NSMs discovered that the only way to fulfil their vocation was to transfer to stipendiary ministry. This provided some alleviation for the hard-pressed ranks of the latter, but did not encourage further recruitment to NSM. Secondly, many potential NSMs were in any case deterred by the unrealistic demands of the training, which required people with stretching, full-time jobs to give up many hours of leisure time, travel many miles and write many essays, on an inflexible schedule which was usually still geared to the conventional three academic terms in the year. As a result the supply of NSM candidates began to dry up during the eighties, and the network of part-time courses is now so short of ordinands that the future of several courses will be in doubt unless they are permitted to diversify by the House of Bishops.¹

The story of non-stipendiary ministry during these two decades highlights the failure to provide an adequate theological foundation. Even Michael Ramsey, in an oft-quoted statement written in 1972, did not get further than the 1958 Lambeth Fathers in concluding that no theological principle was at stake in ordaining a man without providing a stipend, although he made the point more positively and encouragingly:

I regard the contemporary development of a priesthood which combines a ministry of word and sacrament with employment in a secular profession not as a modern fad but as a recovery of something indubitably apostolic and primitive.²

During the eighties more rigorous attempts have been made to define a theology of NSM as an ordained ministry within the secular structures.³ A further variation of title (Minister in Secular Employment: MSE) has emerged. Parallel with this it has at last been realised that NSM in the

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- 1 63 candidates were recommended to train for NSM in 1989 compared to 126 in 1978. See further *Ordination Training on Courses*, the Report of the Working Party on the Structure and Finance of Theological Courses (ACCM Occasional Paper 30, Feb. 1989), which recommended a reduction from 15 courses to 10 with a minimum of 24 ordinands per course.
 - 2 M. Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, SPCK, London 1972, p 4.
 - 3 See, e.g., M. Bourke, 'The Theology of a Non-Stipendiary Ministry' in *Theology* vol. LXXXIV (1981), pp 177-182; M. Ranken, 'A Theology for the Priest at Work' in *Theology* vol. LXXXV (1982), pp 108-113; P. Baelz and W. Jacob, eds, *Ministers of the Kingdom: Explorations in Non-Stipendiary Ministry*, CIO Publishing, London 1985; J. Fuller and P. Vaughan, eds, *Working for the Kingdom: The Story of Ministers in Secular Employment*, SPCK, London 1986.

parishes also requires a contextualised theology: it is insufficient to regard it as a pale reflection of our present stipendiary ministry. The main thrust of this work has been to relate a theology of ordination to the collaborative, or shared, ministry which is developing in many parishes, and which is unquestionably the major growth point of ministry in the Church of England at the present time.

Ordination and Ministry in the Local Church

If there is any point of common ground in current discussions about ministry it must surely lie in the recovery of the concept of every-member ministry as fundamental to the biblical doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ. Within the Church of England this has been well summarised in several documents such as the Board of Education report *All are Called* (CIO Publishing, London 1985). At an ecumenical level the Lima document of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), has been widely studied and accepted. It defines ministry as 'the service to which the whole people of God is called, whether as individuals, as a local community, or as the universal Church.'¹ From this starting point BEM proceeds to examine the relationship between the ministry of the whole people of God and the ordained ministry. Each is seen as essential to the fulfilment of the other. Whether or not the clergy receive a stipend is regarded as of little significance.² In a global context this may well be true; in the Church of England it makes all the difference.

In an English parish the minister, according to canon law, is the priest who holds the benefice, receives a stipend and exercises the cure of souls. No more than a modest dent has been made in this state of affairs as a result of the theological shift in thinking just described, despite the fact that, with rapidly declining numbers of stipendiary priests over the past twenty-five years, the benefice system is now sustained only by a return to the evils of pluralism and absenteeism which disgraced the Church's ministry in former times. The revolution in thinking about ministry may be in full swing, the revolution in action can scarcely begin until the benefice system is dismantled.

Until this is done there will be no clarity about what the paid ministry, imported from outside the parish, is supposed to provide. If shared ministry, using the variety of gifts present in the local church, is taken seriously, it will be obvious that a parish which is temporarily or permanently without an incumbent is not thereby bereft of ministry. A case may be argued for the need to supply a stipendiary ministry for one or more of the following reasons:

1. to provide *a more highly-trained, professional teaching ministry* as a resource to enable the whole ministry of the local church;

1 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982 (hereafter referred to as BEM), statement on Ministry, para. 7.

2 *Ibid.*, para. 46.

2. to provide *evangelistic and church-building gifts* where the local church is too weak to undertake responsibility for its own ministry or to provide its own leadership;
3. to provide a *prophetic ministry* from outside to deliver the local church from a narrow, parochial outlook;
4. to provide an *available pastoral ministry*, set apart with time to give to people;
5. to provide any other *specific resources of ministry* which are needed, but which are not available among the members of the local church.

The last point may, and at present normally does, include sacramental ministry. But it is increasingly argued that where a local church takes responsibility for its ministry seriously it should normally be possible to find leaders within the community to preside at the eucharistic assembly. It becomes increasingly artificial to import a stipendiary priest just for sacramental purposes.

Attempts are made to justify the dependence of the local church on a stipendiary sacramental ministry on the ground that the congregation receives a priest as an extension of the bishop's ministry. The fact that the incumbent is not 'home-grown' emphasises the fact that the diocese is the true definition of the local church, within which the bishop and the college of presbyters exercise pastoral oversight. This is to invent a theology of structures to do duty for a theology of orders. We will look at the historical roots of this argument in a moment, but there is no way that a modern English diocese can be regarded as the equivalent of a local eucharistic community in the early Church.

A local president of the eucharistic community, duly ordained to the ministry, is not a congregationalist subversion of episcopal oversight. Ordination, whether to stipendiary or to non-stipendiary ministry, whether to serve as deacon or priest in one's home church or in a distant parish, must always by definition involve an association with the bishop's ministry. Orders lose their significance if they are not recognised as authorisation to minister in the whole 'Church of God'. Within a divided Christendom, of course, no orders are so recognised in practice. But there can be no partial or local form of ordination. The act of ordination brings a new relationship, not only to the local church, but also to the Church universal.¹ The theological distinctiveness of a local ordained ministry does not therefore lie in the form of ordination.

At this point it may be wondered whether there is any substance to our discussion. If local NSMs and stipendiary clergy are one in their ordination, and all stipendiary clergy are licensed to a particular sphere of ministry, that being in most cases to serve a local Christian community, what can the non-stipendiary ministry be but another version of what we are already familiar with in the stipendiary ministry?

1 Ibid., para. 42.

The distinctiveness of local ordained ministry (LOM) lies in its being called out, trained and exercised within one local community as part of the corporate ministry of the local church. It is not a supplementary ministry to assist the professional clergy where they are hard pressed; it is one aspect of the development of shared ministry in the local church and is eventually necessary if such a development is to become mature, permanent and healthy. It is in strong, not weak congregations that LOM should most readily emerge.

There is therefore an important distinction to be made in the relationship which exists between the ordained ministry which arises from the life of the local church and that which is deployed by means of a stipend. The historic orders of bishops, priests and deacons took their origin from the local ordained ministry. It was the missionary and inter-church ministry of the apostles and their companions which, though often self-supporting, attracted the financial assistance of the congregations which they had founded, and with which they remained in contact.

Local and Inter-Church Ministry

In the commentary which accompanies BEM it is pointed out that 'the earliest Church knew both the travelling ministry of such missionaries as Paul and the local ministry of leadership in places where the Gospel was received.'¹ The New Testament words for ministry which most readily describe this distinction are apostleship (*apostolē*) and oversight (*episkopē*). Recent writers such as Thurian and Schillebeeckx have drawn attention to the importance of these two levels of ministry, both in the early Church and today.² This is how Thurian describes what was happening in the early Church:

While the ministries in the local church were being organised into a college of elders with a leader, the ministry of the apostles and their helpers was continuing and ensuring a link between all the Churches. This universal apostolic ministry still remained valid and necessary so that the local churches did not lose contact and true communion in the unity of the faith, of sacraments and of ministries.³

British scholars such as Richard Hanson and James Dunn have qualified the extent of what we know about apostolic ministry. They have pointed out that while the apostles may have continued to exercise authority over the churches they had founded, there is no evidence of a universal jurisdiction; nor is it clear that they made any provision for the perpetuation of their ministry.⁴

1 *Ibid.*, commentary on para. 21.

2 M. Thurian, *Priesthood and Ministry*, Mowbray, Oxford 1983; E. Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, SCM, London 1985.

3 Thurian, *op. cit.*, p 54.

4 A. T. and R. P. C. Hanson, *The Identity of the Church*, SCM, London 1987, p 146; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, SCM, London 1975, pp 271ff.

In due course, however, as BEM points out, 'bishops began increasingly to exercise *episkopē* over several local communities at the same time . . . They provide a focus of unity in life and witness within areas comprising several eucharistic communities.'¹ While bishops were thus transferred to an apostolic linking ministry, each local church became a unit of pastoral care under the *episkopē* of a single presbyter. In this process the essentially corporate nature of leadership in the ministry of the local church became obscured and frequently lost sight of altogether, while the ministry of priests/presbyters became an uncertain combination of *episkopē* and *apostolē*. Many factors leading to change, such as the break-up of the Roman Empire and the conversion of tribes in northern Europe, produced new situations calling for a flexible response in the Church's ministry. All that is important here is to note the consequence of historical change upon the parochial ministry as it has been received in the Church of England.

Until modern times stipends of varying amounts were available through endowments to support the ministry of *episkopē* in the local church. Now that funds are channelled through a central stipends authority a more flexible deployment of the stipendiary ministry has become possible in response to the requirements of *apostolē*. This is already apparent in the increasing number of clergy in non-parochial appointments in each diocese. Travelling, linking, missionary ministry is thus becoming more available. A radical contribution could be made to the Decade of Evangelism if all stipendiary ministry were to be deployed primarily on the basis of a shared *apostolē* with the bishop; while a local ordained ministry was encouraged and set up to share with the bishop his *episkopē* in each eucharistic community. This would not mean, of course, that stipendiary ministry disappeared from the parishes. It would continue to be available to assist the mission of the local church as needed in any of the five ways described above. Most parishes would continue to have stipendiary ministers working for periods at least equivalent to the average length of stay of modern incumbents. But the difference of function between the two kinds of ministry, stipendiary and NSM, apostolic and episcopal, missionary and pastoral, complementary rather than supplementary, would be clarified while remaining united within the orders conferred by the bishop for ministry within the whole Church of God.

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1 BEM, statement on Ministry, para. 21.