

8: Shared Ministry

WHO IS A MINISTER? A REVOLUTION IN TRADITIONAL THINKING

112. The Church of England now has fewer than 11,000 full-time diocesan clergy; whereas the sect of Jehovah's Witnesses claims to have 88,000 ministers in Britain. The explanation of these apparently surprising statistics is that every active member of the Jehovah's Witnesses is reckoned to be a minister, and it is impossible to be a member without being active because the very essence of membership is to get out and about witnessing. Thus it used to be necessary for one elderly, blind lady belonging to the sect to stand out in all weathers holding *Watchtower* magazines at the gates of an Anglican theological college! While not necessarily supporting this particular approach to ministry, much Christian thinking in recent years has also been emphasising the share in ministry which belongs to every Church member. This has become a starting point for many statements about ministry, but even so it was the opinion of the Partners in Mission Consultation which took place in the Church of England in 1981 that this message has not yet been properly heard:

'We are still dominated by the false view that the ministry of the Church is confined to bishops, priests and deacons. The whole pilgrim people of God share in ministry, and clergy and laity must be trained for this shared ministry.'

113. Part of the problem is the idea that Christian ministry is limited to a particular area of pastoral and liturgical activity which normally belongs to the clergy. Lay participation in ministry thus becomes something of a desperate measure prompted by a diminishing supply of clergy. But as we have seen there is a much wider view of ministry. An American woman named Nell Braxton Gibson wrote an article entitled 'Is this not Ministry?' which was published in the *Audenshaw Papers* for September 1981. In it she described her involvement with her family, her friends, her community, and concluded with these words:

'The true meaning of ministry is service. The meaning of *laos* is people. I am a lay minister because I am one of the people who serve.'

She felt able to say this simply because she was a Christian, and not because she had any accredited or official ministry in her Church.

MEMBERS AND MINISTERS ONE OF ANOTHER

114. But on this basis, what is *not* ministry? Helen Oppenheimer has referred to the manner in which, in our modern talk, ministry has become a greedy concept:

'The notion of ministry tends to gobble up everything into itself so that it becomes impossible to sort out what is not ministry. All are ministers but some are more ministers than others . . . "They also serve who only stand and wait." Who is anyone to say that someone else is not even standing and waiting? But then does it amount to much to call somebody a minister? Unless ministry can be distinguished from something else which is not ministry, it seems hardly worth talking about.'²

115. It is conceivable that we could set about reversing the trend of all these modern reports, and cease speaking of all Christians as ministers. There are other words which describe the general service of God in terms of e.g. 'witness', 'discipleship', 'stewardship', with which many Christians might feel happier. But this is merely to alter terminology. Helen Oppenheimer's point is that, whatever words we use, our whole emphasis upon ministry is in danger of obscuring something of even more fundamental importance. The glory of the laity is not that in the Church we are all ministers, but that we are all members of the people of God. As Helen Oppenheimer remarks, 'To feed at God's table should be quite as awe-inspiring as to wait at it.'³ The status of any Christian, therefore, is not in bearing the office of a priest, or a churchwarden, or an organist, but in being by God's gift a baptised member of the laity, and whatever ministerial roles are undertaken by any persons within the Church have as their object the service of the people of God.

116. Having made this point we shall continue nevertheless to speak of shared ministry because membership of the people of God involves a call to serve one another in the Body of Christ, and together to engage in mission to the world:

'As God has called you, live up to your calling . . . There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all . . . But each of us has been given his gift.'
(Ephesians 4.1-7 NEB)

Baptism does therefore include an authorisation to minister as a Christian, and ministry is in fact more than a role; it is a way of being the Church, the means of expressing that care for others which is the true 'agape' at the heart of the Christian life. There is a mutual interdependence in Christian ministry because God has given us each different gifts. This is the whole point of St Paul's analogy of the human body (1 Cor. 12). The total ministry of the Body of Christ includes the response of every member to a call to share in the service which Christ himself gave to others.

THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE MINISTRY OF THE LAITY

117. In common speech 'lay' means 'non-professional', and it does so precisely because in the past the Church has been understood to be made up of, (i) the clergy as the professionals (so when the clergy teach, the Church

teaches; when a person is ordained he 'enters the Church'); and (ii) the rest who belong, but lack the skills, or the dedication, or the knowledge of the clergy. Lay status has therefore been expressed in negative terms and this is carried over into thinking about shared ministry when it is divided up into ordained ministry and lay ministry, with the latter being exercised at some less exalted level than that enjoyed by the one who occupies the altar and the pulpit. In the steady development of lay ministry which has been taking place since the middle of the last century it has gradually become recognised that those who are not ordained may have an important contribution to make to the theology, the spirituality and the liturgy of the Church. 'What is the province of the laity?' asked Mgr George Talbot, writing to Archbishop Manning in 1857. 'To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all!'⁴ By contrast the Church of England in 1866 established the Office of Reader to provide an opportunity of ministry for committed laymen. But a clear differentiation of roles between ordained and lay ministers was observed, for those admitted were not allowed to preach or to officiate in consecrated buildings, which were the preserve of the ordained ministry.

118. By 1965, the Decree on the apostolate of the Laity from the Second Vatican Council sounded a very different note:

'The laity, too, share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of the whole People of God.'

Nor was this role seen as one which could only be fulfilled 'in the world', for:

'the laity have an active part to play in the life and activity of the Church.'⁵

In the Church of England a parallel development has brought lay ministry right into the sanctuary; indeed, readers are often regarded primarily as service-takers, and other lay people are to be found administering the sacrament and undertaking liturgical ministry in various ways. All too often the effect of developments in lay ministry has in fact been an obscuring and confusion of roles. The Partners in Mission report sums it up by saying:

'There is a widening of the understanding of ministry in today's Church. This we welcome, but we recognise that it is causing a crisis for both clergy and laity in their understanding of their own roles.'⁶

The crisis arises because it is considered that there must be something called lay ministry which signifies non-clerical ministry. The role of the laity is still being defined in negative terms which are not much different from those of Thomas Arnold, who described the laity as 'the Church—minus the clergy'. In fact the ministry of the laity *is* the ministry of the whole people of God. It embraces all the particular kinds of ministry, including those undertaken by Church members who are in orders, which go to make up the Church's total service of God.

PRIESTLY SERVICE

119. We have now encountered the first of two major changes in traditional language about ministry resulting from a renewed biblical theology of the Church which in recent years has received wider acceptance in theory than it has found expression in practice. This is, in short, an acknowledgment that the ministry of the laity *is* the ministry of the Church. The second, rather startling adjustment of language comes from the realisation that the most appropriate term to describe the whole ministry of the laity is 'priestly service'. Lay ministry is priestly ministry! All Christian ministry is offered first and foremost to God, so Scripture speaks of the calling of every Christian in priestly and sacrificial terms:

'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' (1 Peter 2.9, NEB)

'Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer.' (Romans 12.1, GNB)

'Through Jesus, then let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the tribute of lips which acknowledge his name, and never forget to show kindness and to share what you have with others; for such are the sacrifices which God approves.' (Hebrews 13.15f, NEB)

Christian social action, concern for justice, acts of compassion, building of community are all priestly in character, not just because they are dedicated to God, but because they witness to God's own activity. To do this they must depend on the direction and power of the Holy Spirit and be an expression of the life and self-offering of Christ, in whom God was reconciling the world to himself. (2 Cor. 5.18-6.1.) As the Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) puts it:

'All Christian ministry . . . flows and takes its shape from this source and model.'⁷

Christ provides not only the example for our service of God, but the perfect sacrifice which renders all other sacrifice obsolete. The Church can undertake a reconciling ministry in the world only if it is abiding in Christ and living in the power of his Spirit. The ARCIC Statement goes on to say that:

'The goal of the ordained ministry is to serve this priesthood of all the faithful.'⁸

It is a fundamental weakness in the life of the Church today that despite a clear statement of this kind so many of the laity continue to regard themselves as a sort of clerical support system. The function of the laity as the Body of Christ is neither to be excluded from the sanctuary nor to take over the role of the clergy. It is to serve God *both* in the liturgy *and* in the world.

ASPECTS OF SHARED MINISTRY

120. 'The ministry of Jesus Christ is corporately shared with the whole Church.'⁹

There are various ways in which this comprehensive view of ministry requires a style which is increasingly referred to as *collaborative*.

(1) Collaboration between Ministers

The very fact of the distribution of different gifts to each one should prompt ministers to work together, ordained with lay, men with women, young with old, intellectual with practical, prophetic with pastoral. This sharing is not limited to formal teams of ministers; it is the partnership which results from accepting each other as truly called into an 'every-member' ministry. There is a shared source of ministry in Christ, and a shared task, but there are different gifts and different roles.

(2) Collaboration in Leadership

One particular role is that of leadership. There will be opportunities later to look both at the leadership required from the Bishop and also at patterns of leadership in the local Church. Here we are concerned with the principle of collaborative leadership. This is a complex issue over which divisions are apparent in the Church at various levels. In the opinion of one writer, 'neither the simplicity of the concept of hierarchy nor an insufficiently thought out adoption of democratic forms of leadership will help us'.¹⁰ The Church is different from other forms of human organisation, but that is no reason to put expectations on leaders of a superhuman kind. We shall consider later the focus and authority of the priesthood, but that is neither the beginning nor the end of the matter. The beginning was the collegial, corporate leadership of the early Church; the end for us today is a leadership properly responsive to the different demands made upon it. These include the liturgy, which requires a president; the decision-making process, which requires a chairman; and congregational oversight, which requires a pastor. There are no compelling reasons why the roles of president, chairman and pastor have to be combined, or why any of them may not be shared. Indeed, there are very good reasons, which will emerge later, why they should be undertaken by a collaborative ministry which inspires and enables the whole Church.

(3) Collaboration between Local Churches

Just as the individual minister has a distorted view of his calling unless it is seen in relationship to the ministry of others (1 Corinthians 3.6), so local Churches can only fulfil their mission by recognising that it is shared with others. It should not be necessary to have formal team and group ministries before this is put into practice; parochial boundaries should express commitment to mission not a limitation of it. There are also other dimensions to mission which do not lend themselves to neat demarcation, involving Christians of other denominations in areas where the Church has no formal structures. This may make collaboration easier, but at the cost of distancing ministry from the institutional Church. The effect is serious unless local Churches can also learn to work in the same collaborative relationship. There are other ways, too, in which the local Church is weakened if it tries to live by its own resources alone. Further attention will be given to this later, but two other points will be made here about mission which are not simply related to the local Church.

(4) *Collaboration in Mission*

The first is to observe that it is a false distinction to see the sphere of ordained ministry as being solely within the Church while that of lay ministry is specifically 'in the world'. Certainly there is a danger, as we have already noted, of consuming the energies of the laity within the organised activities of the Church. However this awareness should not obscure the contribution which each person has to make to the life of the Church:

'When each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.' (Ephesians 4.16 GNB)

Similarly the public office of the ordained ministry means that many deacons and priests, and especially bishops, have an important contribution to make to the Church's mission. But there are problems about the priest who sees himself working 'out on the frontier', conducting a one-man mission which is unrelated to the rest of the Body of Christ. He, too, is called to a collaborative ministry. This leads to the second point, which is that no individual Christian is ever alone in witness to Christ. No matter how isolated the position may be, he or she acts in association with other Christians in the Body of Christ. In this sense every member of the Church is a representative minister. The basic resource of committed Christian men and women is by the grace of God everywhere present whether the Church develops a strategy or not. But they must be enabled to be the Church, and our consideration of a relevant strategy must therefore take us now to consider how such an enabling can take place.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8: SHARED MINISTRY

¹*PIM Report*, p.47, para.192, cf. paras. 84, 110.

²H. Oppenheimer, in *Stewards of the Mysteries of God*, ed. E. James, DLT, 1979, p.12.

³*Ibid.*, p.15f.

⁴*Report on the Position of the Laity in the Church*, 1902, 2nd edn. introd. by N. Sykes, 1952, p.iii.

⁵*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. A. Abbott, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, pp.491, 500.

⁶*Op. cit.*, p.31, para.110.

⁷'Ministry and Ordination', in *The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, CTS/SPCK, 1982, p.30, para.3.

⁸*Ibid.*, p.33, para.7.

⁹R. Metcalfe, *Sharing Christian Ministry*, Mowbrays, 1981, p.7.

¹⁰J. J. A. Vollebergh, 'Religious leadership', in *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?*, SCM Press, 1980, p.55.