

Where is God in all this? Exploring and affirming those in sector ministry

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Introduction

Part of the agenda behind the production of this book concerned the misunderstandings and perhaps prejudices linked with those in sector ministry. On a personal note I have experienced these misunderstandings during the course of my own ministry over the past decade. Some disappointment was expressed when I took up the job of chaplain to the Bishop of Oxford in 1987. This disappointment reflected mild ambivalence about church management and bureaucracy. Was it an appropriate use of a priest to assist a diocesan bishop in his administrative work? Driving, carrying suitcases and answering the telephone seemed to be incompatible for some with the language of vocation! When in 1990 I decided to seek employment in the National Health Service as a chaplain the expression of bemusement was even sharper. 'Don't you feel up to working in a parish?' was the way a pompous archdeacon expressed his own lack of sympathy with health-care chaplaincy. I often felt that my development and training as a Bishop's Chaplain in administration, conflict management and seeing the diocese as an organization, with all its strengths and weaknesses, was first-rate preparation for the challenges of the National Health Service. When I eventually decided to respond positively to an opportunity to be a parish priest and complete my research and writing, the response of some was to greet me back into the mainstream church, as if my sector experience had been part of some misspent youth. By chance as I reflect on the earlier chapters of this book I am preparing to move once again. The move takes me into a unique in-between world as parish priest and Master of the Lady Katherine Leveson Hospital. In this post I shall be licensed by the bishop but work under a group of governors for a secular institution with its roots firmly in a Christian vision.

This personal note is necessary by way of explaining some of my own biases and presuppositions - I share the editor's belief that sector ministry is both misunderstood and undervalued by the church. However, having worked in a number of contexts, the divisions and assumptions both amongst sector ministers and parochial clergy demand further interrogation and a more subtle and coherent representation. The reflections that follow are therefore inevitably limited, partial and deliberately open-ended.

Faithful presence - ministry or mission?

The overwhelming impression that emerges from reading the reflections of individuals and groups working within particular sectors is that of a persistent, faithful presence in a very

wide diversity of situations. Here the minister encounters a huge spectrum of people in their own particular contexts with a rich tapestry of hopes, needs and agendas, in spite of the continued steady decline of organized religion. Within the chapters of this book we see a startling measure of energy, persistence and creativity in ministry. Preconceptions about the church, God and clergy are broken down. Lives are changed through sensitive and careful listening. Some of the deepest and most profound crises of life are interpreted and healed through a compassionate *being there*. Further, in these difficult and testing situations where women and men have to earn respect through the quality of their relationships there is enormous creativity. Those who have power to change and direct the shape of communities are challenged to think about the spiritual and religious dimension of their choices. Artists are enabled to help us dig deeper into the mystery of our human lives through the support of sector ministry. Business people and industrialists know that there are people who appreciate some of the complex ethical dilemmas facing them in their work. Boys and girls have access to a style of religious nurture which supports and encourages them in their educational adventure. Those who work at sea are given the practical support they need to alleviate isolation. Police, farmers, those who work in the forces, nurses, doctors, academics, shop workers, managers, pilots and air crew all have access to someone who is ready to meet them on their terms and offer appropriate and human support. We can but marvel at the thought of the sheer colour and depth and extensiveness of this sector ministerial work. Countless lives are changed in a multiplicity of ordinary and extraordinary ways.

In this sense we all have much to learn from one another about the nature of ministry and the shape of the church's mission. This process of learning is not facilitated through the sharp divisions set down by those in both parish and sector work. There is a mistaken presupposition running through many of the essays here that the parish or congregation is somehow a more stable entity with the role of the priest or ministry accepted, clear and unambiguous. This does not reflect my experience in Middleton and Wishaw, two small rural parishes in north Warwickshire. While there may be some hangover from a period of stability where churchgoing was more widely part of the weekly round, assumptions and the context has radically changed. Rural parishes are no longer places of long-term stability, but mixed communities where families come and go with some groups commuting long distances to work. There is economic diversity which gives rise to communal tensions and conflicts. The village pub is run by a national brewery along strict centralized guidelines with only nominal interest in the village community. The school has gone and been taken over by a private nursery serving the needs of families from as wide a radius as ten miles away. In a comfortable community where financial security protects most from certain vulnerabilities, there is no more need for religion and the church than there might be in the army barracks, the shopping centre or the airport. Sunday worship has to compete with Tamworth Snow Dome. More often it is the only day when parents and children can have a long lie-in in bed and not have to bother to get up and expose themselves to what can often feel alien and irrelevant worship!

In other words, long gone are the days (familiar to me in my first curacy in 1985) when ministry was about being around in a parish, conducting Occasional Offices with care, visiting the sick and depending upon a reasonable number of families to turn up for worship to keep the church both alive and solvent. At one level all ministry, whether from parish or sector, is mission. Mission is no longer the sole prerogative of a section of the church, usually evangelical, who are into that kind of thing. Mission is a prerequisite of all in ministry because of the steady decline of church life and the marginalisation] of the spiritual and religious dimension. It may be the case then, that those working in parishes understand the consequences of being on the margins as insightfully as those sector clergy in this book. In this sense the division between parish and sector needs to be discarded. There is much learning to be done together as experiences in ministry are attended to with care and are mission-enlivened through prayer, questioning and digging ever deeper into the mystery of working for the Kingdom of God.

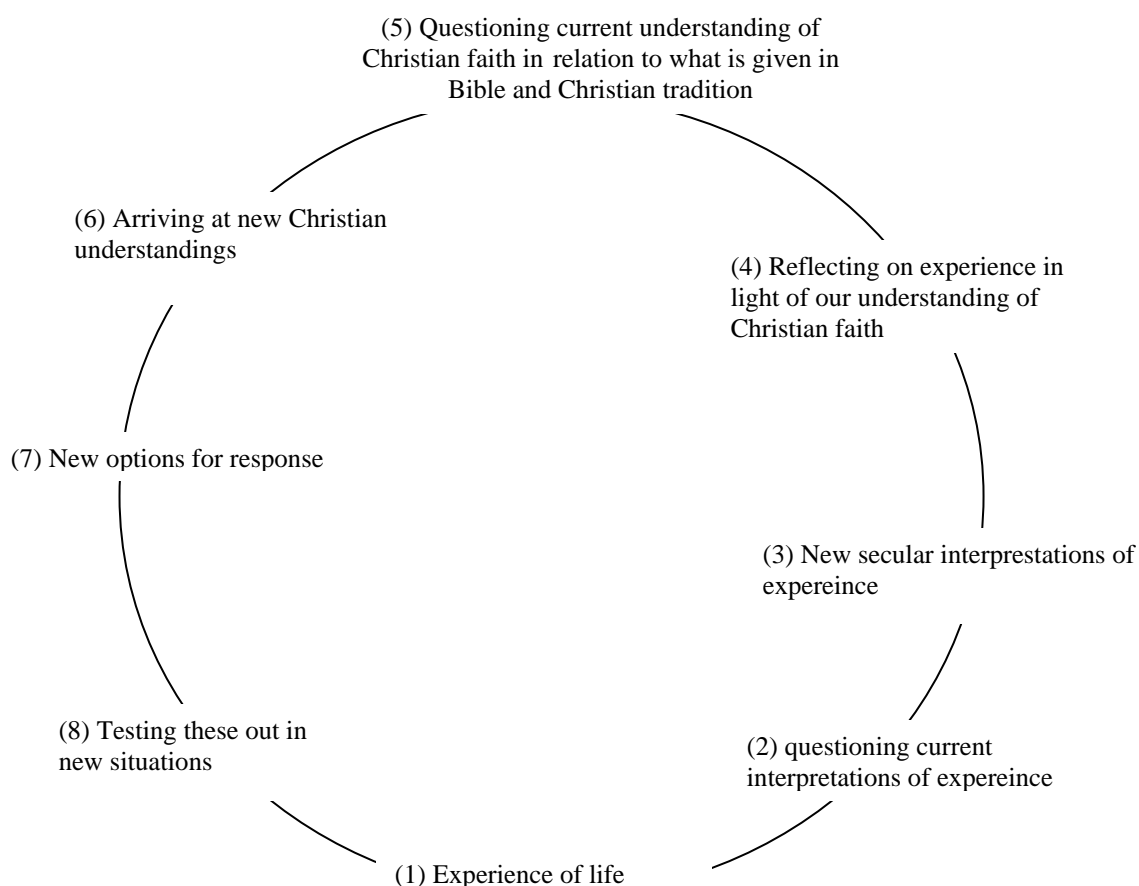
What kind of God?

The critical factor in both the preparedness and ability of ministers to continue to learn to grow is space. Individuals and groups need to have space to think, to feel and to reflect. Part of the *activity* of all ministry, motivated perhaps by both a sense of marginalisation and defensiveness about the legitimacy of the role, can lead ministry into an intellectual poverty. This particular attitude found expression recently at a clergy meeting when a neighbouring priest, on discovering me reading a book exclaimed 'Why are you reading those words when there's all those souls in your parish to be saved?' Ministry, from one perspective, is about doing rather than being and thinking. This has significant dangers and this is reflected in the contributions. Understandably the quality of reflection varies and I suspect that this quality is partly dependent upon the investment by each individual minister in time and space to ask questions and explore experience. Put alternatively by using a cooking analogy - too much contemporary thinking is done on the cooker top or in the microwave rather than being carefully marinated and cooked in the oven. The quality of reflection finds expression in the theological vision which shapes the way we both think and act.

All of us have our own unique stories to tell about how God has got hold of us. We have all asked, and should continue to ask 'What does God want of me?' The combination of our personalities, experiences and contexts leaves us with a variety of understandings of God. These perceptions, or our models of God, can and do give rise to all kinds of patterns of belief. Despite, or perhaps because of, our theological education there is a curious lack of awareness and articulation of the sheer variety of models of God and patterns of belief inside and outside the churches. This silence or absence is evident in these contributions. There is curiously little talk about God. There is a need to share the variety of conceptions of God and to be explicit in exploring both the patterns of belief and models of pastoral practice that follow from them. Theology from this perspective should be rescued from the

academy and, rather, ministerial experience be viewed as a resource for education and discovery, where honesty is promoted as points of disagreement and where creativity and imagination are engendered in sharing vision and hope. Ministry needs to be enabled to recover a deeper sense of confidence about God in particular and theological reflection in general. It is interesting to note that many of the contributors chose not to be explicit about their own theological agendas, and with a few notable exceptions, failed to articulate any theological depth in their reflection upon their work.

It would be an interesting exercise to ask the contributors to articulate the main sources of influence on their ministry. It is true that ministers often have little time or commitment to maintaining any interest in theology.



Based on a diagram in Margaret Kane, *What Kind of God?* (London: SCM 1986)

Those who teach theology must be held to account in some respects. Pastoral theology, as a distinct discipline, has in some respects lost its direction. Little innovative, integrated and interdisciplinary thinking is being pursued, and the question remains about whether or not pastoral theology has a distinctive methodology and content. Most of the pastoral

theology available to Anglican theological students is largely shaped and influenced by psychology and psycho-therapeutic disciplines. Those responsible for theological nurture and formation in ministry, need to look seriously at these contributions and ask about models of training in the light of this shared experience. Are individuals enabled to make connections and respond creatively by being empowered by their theological education?

The issue of theological reflection has, of course, to do partly with time, but also with a basic attitude that understands that this thinking can make any difference to practice. Margaret Kane provides a useful diagram outlining the process and stages of theological reflection.' Is it a process that can enable Christians working in these secular contexts to make sense of their faith in the light of their working experience?

It was interesting to note the different ways in which criticism surfaced within each sector. The school chaplain acknowledges the problems surrounding compulsory worship. Issues around consumerism and Sunday trading were commented on less sharply than might have been the case in an outsider's account. The point that connects us all is a society whose values have changed and are changing, which poses particular threats and opportunities for religion. The armed forces and hospital chaplains have some difficulty in working for institutions which may fundamentally challenge some theological and ethical positions. When did the prison or police chaplain last challenge their own cultures or institutions? Both agree that this is part of the role but it is left as a theoretical position rather than a practical piece of pastoral response. All this may be a reflection of sector ministers working in environments where there is a greater level of control than parish clergy usually experience. It might reflect an anxiety that clergy might not be allowed to control the content of the work. There are profound dangers in the desire to be professional and in the process of professionalization. The freedom from the church which sector ministry may offer is often had at the expense of a critical distance which can speak the truth in love and maintain a creative distance from the changing and sometimes oppressive institutions of society. We need to guard against the picture of God as the great controller, the Colonel-in-Chief, the air traffic controller, the captain of the ship, the headmaster, the prison governor or the Chief Constable! There is a danger in building structures and organizing implicit patterns of belief to reflect this kind of God in our desire for secure professionalism.

Of course we are inheritors of a long and complicated history of the relationship of our faith to culture. In our present social setting we need to take a positive view of secularity because it is within the particular institutions that sector ministers have to work out their Christian obedience to the gospel, making all kinds of acts of faith in the transforming power of Christ.

There is a theological basis for going with the culture. There is a need to state a belief in God who is not confined to the religious sphere or embattled against the non-Christian structures. This is a belief in God as involved in all parts of his creation; an incarnational frame of belief rather than a redemptive one through conflict.

Is all authority good?

One of the areas which I perceive as a major theological crisis is in the critique of this new culture as it approaches the end of the millennium, within which the church has to negotiate its place and role.

As mentioned above, sector ministers seem reluctant to take on the role of saboteur, mole or whistle blower. In what way are these individuals free to work in the way that they feel they should? If God is the headmaster or Chief constable, then is all authority good? There is a need to question the assumption of the implicit goodness of the organization and culture and to ask ourselves how institutionalized we have become. Put another way; do we tell people what they want to hear? With whom, or to whom do we need to belong?

There are barbaric and wicked aspects of all of the institutions within which sector ministers work as well as in the Church. There is tendency within the Health Service to treat healing and healthcare as commodities whose provision is to be treated as a business in the market. Prisons rarely rehabilitate individuals and seem only at times to serve the purposes of making society feel at ease and safe. Many schools may be committed to teaching but know little about the education of the whole person. We are trapped in an economic system within which commercialism and the spirituality of retail therapy is all pervading. This originates, in part, from the temporary eclipse of the idea and ideal of a caring society. Is it true that today altruism has become a private hobby? Has the publicly accepted moral assumption that resources should be used for the common good been eroded away? What kind of professions might still be regarded as vocational? What about the social and moral dimensions of our political and social life? Above all, are these ultimately issues about God?

These are not narrowly political questions but broadly profound theological ones. For at the heart of our faith is the matter of simple and ultimate reality - a God whose concern is for promoting and sharing holiness, justice, peace and love. There is therefore an inescapable link between our human *togetherness* and the Kingdom of God. Does our experience of the particular context within which we work, and society in general, lead us to believe that the fabric of society is alerting and promoting people to care for their neighbour and share with their neighbours?

Who is going to guard, cherish and promote essential human well-being within society? Who has the vicarious task of judgement so that the pseudo divinities dominating culture and reducing human beings to functions are revealed for what they are? Priests and ministers have the privilege of meeting people in their flesh and blood, their living and dying, their suffering and recovering. These moments described movingly by many of the contributors are inescapably sacramental - they are to do with the sacredness and hallowing of ordinary things in ordinary people. We need therefore to look at ministry which will enable us to organize a life which the world can sustain and human beings can

both endure and enjoy. Our authority as Christians comes from our common sense of calling and works only because we are human beings loved by God.

We are confronted by a pagan proletariat ... the mentality of their surroundings completely conquers them ... our mission must aim, not to organise those who already are practising Catholics ... but to penetrate the different milieu with the spirit of Christianity.²

As with our colleagues we think through these issues in the context of our own workplaces, we need to be reassured, challenged and drawn back to the metaphors that set us free. Above all, we need to be drawn back to the significance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus and to see that all human culture, including Christian culture, has to be revalued anew in their light.

Notes

¹ Margaret Kane *What Kind of God?* (London: SCM, 1986), p. 86,

² Abbé Michonneau *Revolution in a City Parish* (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1949), pp. 2 and 7.