

100 Editions!

Keith Holt and Stan Frost

We welcome the New Year with a celebration of the outline story of Chrism! It seems right not to claim too much for our efforts as space is limited and we are sure to have forgotten something, or decided not to mention some deserving person. Hope you enjoy the narrative.

The 100 editions of the Newsletter/Journal could have been 100 years in the sense that the story really has its roots in the theological upheavals of the 19th century in Europe, including Britain, and in the international violence of the 20th century. Post world war two the movement towards new understandings of the word "Church" and a re-appraisal of the relationship between Christian teaching and the world in which Christians find themselves day by day accelerated. In 1955 the late George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community, wrote (unpublished) "God is the Life of life". Perhaps that deep wisdom reflects a little of the mood of change in the post-war world. Anyway, the period 1943—1980 is splendidly described in John Mantle's book "Britain's First Worker Priests" (ISBN 0-334-02798-5) published by SCM in 2000. The book is a good read and fascinating background to the origins of Chrism, if you find that subject appealing.

Another piece of the background is the foundation of the Southwark Ordination Course in 1960 by Bishop Mervyn Stockwood at Southwark with his Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson. Many of the early graduates of that course saw themselves as Ministers in Secular Employment MSE, including Michael Ranken. The Southwark Priest-worker Chapter was formed soon afterwards.

I have mislaid the first edition, but the second edition of the "Letter of ... A Newsletter among Ministers-at-Work and others concerned" is dated May 1982, and published by the late Michael Ranken. The content is pithy, informative and thought provoking, as ever! It was reported that: "Dr. Moses Tay, who entered the self-supporting ministry in 1977 is to be the new Bishop of Singapore". In 2007 England is still waiting! Then, and for many years to follow, the Newsletter's front page carried, courtesy of the pen of Harry Hill, a wonderful cartoon of a "dog-collared" person doing an ordinary secular job.

It was around this time that a group of NSMs who saw themselves as having a work-focussed vocation began to meet at the Church of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, in the city of London. Canon Gerald Hudson was the incumbent part of the period. Subsequently the meetings were transferred to a venue next door to St. Andrew by the Wardrobe, also in the city, and from there to either Anthony Winter's flat (he was Hon. Treasurer at the time) or to Anthony and Vickie Hurst's home in Victoria, where it retained the title of the "Wardrobe Group").

Out of these gatherings came the thinking and planning which led to the first Conference for NSMs held at Nottingham University from 6/8 April, 1984. Organisers included Michael Ranken, Canon Hudson, Christopher Martin, Patrick Vaughan, Michael Skinner, and David Gill. Another name that comes to mind from this time is that of Elizabeth Bonham, Chrism Membership secretary for many years, and one of several early women enthusiasts. Beginning in the early 1980s it became usual for a Bishop passing through London, or working in the area to join in some Wardrobe Group evenings. In the Newsletter of July 1985 Bishop Kenneth Woolcombe reported on the Archbishop's residential for Bishops, held in June that year. The Bishop said he had been encouraged to continue his supportive role in, with and under the MSE, if that is their wish. Bishop Martin Wharton, now of Newcastle, and Bishop David Smith, later of Bradford, continued this tradition. Thus grew the practice of nominating a Bishop to have a special interest in MSE.

Similarly in the 1980s there were specific contributions from the Newsletter readership if time allowed, and from the Wardrobe Group, about the growth of NSM in the Anglican Church, and to the development of central regulations for NSM ministry. By 1987 the Wardrobe Group consisted of Bp. Kenneth Woolcombe, Chairman, Will Baynes, Nicholas Von Benzon, Deirdre Palk, Michael Ranken, Michael Skinner, Timothy Tyndall, Bp. Stephen Verney, Vice-Chair, Anthony Winter, and Barry Wright. The Newsletter reported in 1986 that there were "Chapters of MSE in a number of Anglican Dioceses." Michael Ranken was commissioned as Dean for MSE in Guildford that year, whilst Bath and

Wells, Birmingham, Canterbury, Rochester, and Southwark had Chapters. A number of other Episcopal areas also had regular or occasional meetings. In 1986 "Chriset", the Christians in Secular Employment Trust, made a grant of £100.00 to encourage the group of MSEs based around the Elephant and Castle in London to launch a newsletter called "Shades of Grey" edited by Anthony Hurst and Keith Holt. Paul Nicolson, still a Chriset Trustee, reported on the financial results of the Nottingham Conference in Newsletter 11 of 1984.

The 1980s saw increasing interest in MSE from the Methodist and other Churches, as well as stronger links with our European colleagues, and the self-supporting ordained ministry groups NASSAM and the Presbyterian Tentmakers, in the USA. We must not forget the arrival of the first Church of England women Deacons in the late 1980s, after the Measure of 1985. But it was not until 1994 that the first women in the Church of England were Priested. Meanwhile other countries and other Christian groups were further ahead. All this contributed to the growth of Chrism and to the continuing debates centred on what the focus of Chrism should be after almost 100 Editions!

Back in November, 1991, the then Rev. Canon Professor Rowan Williams addressed an "Oasis Day" for Southwark MSEs. It is a splendid sign of continuity that Rowan, as the Archbishop is now our Patron!

National Conferences continued regularly after Nottingham and reflective weekends evolved from their beginnings at Sutton Courtenay Abbey, with the support of Bp. Stephen Verney, to the regular programme feature they are now. The Conference at Rydal Hall in the Lake District in July, 1992, was the 5th National MSE/NSM gathering. There were friends from abroad including Marc Laurent from the French Mission, Len Hornick of the USA Tentmakers, and Isolde Boehm from the German Lutheran Church. But the Conference was notable for the decisions it took to adopt a statement of our mission as MSEs, and secondly to form a national, permanent association of Ministers in Secular Employment. Firm proposals were to be tabled at the Manchester Conference in 1993. This of course was the foundation of Chrism, as it became known. Newsletter 43 records and reproduces the "Agreed Statement of the First National Conference of MSE-1984", which made the decisions of 1992 possible. The people who came to the Rydal Hall event expressed many different views, and the vote to form an Association was not unanimous, but it was very positive, and Chrism goes forward!

And from Elizabeth Bonham:

"This means nothing to me" said Tim (*sounds like the beginning of a first reading book, doesn't it?*) "Why don't you have it?" 'IT' was an early edition of the newsletter, which certainly did mean something to me.

"Michael", says I "I've got a computer. Would you like me to bring it to the conference?" "Yes" says Michael Ranken. (*It is a first, reader!*) There is a rumour that Michael could say no but no-one heard him.

By which means we managed to produce a written statement after the first national conference, by Michael, Michael Skinner and I staying up until the early hours photocopying and stapling like mad. In mentioning the first conference, there were about 119 attendees, of which 6 were women, a scenario which was interesting and on which I will make no further comment.

While the conferences - particularly with the Saturday afternoon visits - were and still are important events, the reflective weekends with the Saturday walks, are equally valuable in that we organise them to suit where we are coming from, without the need to explain our positions. Plenty of time to be quiet and reflect, with thoughtful and sometimes challenging theology in thoughtful and challenging venues.

Memories include Marc Laurent wrestling with his angel and remarking that he liked coming to England because he got kissed - something which rarely happened to "an elderly catholic priest in France", agape, Felicity and tea towels, pork pies, wine and laughter, Renee and Henri, tap dancing, traffic jams, Virgin trains, drawing up the constitution Jim and his nemotodes. Welcoming fellow

travellers on the working road, supporting the despairing, rejoicing in finding like minded souls, watching people relax once they realise they have reached a safe haven.

Railing at the hierarchy, button holing anyone wherever and whenever the opportunity arises, to carry on explaining yet again what our form of ministry is about and that there is plenty of room for all. Perhaps our function is to nudge and keep the wheel turning, not trying to reinvent it, but perhaps a redesign might be possible?

As for me, workwise I have left my job of 18 years in a firm of chartered accountants (they relocated and I chose not to go with them). For the present I am secretary to a solicitor, but retirement is definitely on the horizon. I have my bus pass and just might become one of those little old ladies who dawdle in the street at lunchtime blocking the way to the sandwich shop.

CHRISM will change because it is an organisation of questing people who are continually pushing boundaries while attempting to work within rules and regulations, of both church (whatever/wherever) and workplace. It is no bad thing to be a little irritant or flavour in the pottage of ministry.