

A Reflection on the Non-Stipendiary Ministry (3)

*The following is the third article in a short series drawing on a Report written by **Tim Key** during a sabbatical, October and November 2004, from his 'usual' duties as a stipendiary minister in the United Reformed Church in Huddersfield. It takes a particular look at NSM within the URC but uses much wider experience, making it an excellent reflection on the experience of Ministry in Secular Employment. Tim has agreed to publication in "Ministers-at-Work", and well worth reading it is too! This final part is a **reflection on Ministry and Leadership**, drawing on the earlier research findings. It has been slightly edited to make it even easier to read.*

Problems facing the church today

There are many problems that are common to so many churches and denominations, both in this country and in the wider western world, it is difficult to know where to begin. The root of these problems is often considered to be to do with numbers. Certainly, falling attendances at services and decreasing numbers of members have had a huge impact on the churches over the past twenty and more years. These undoubtedly contribute to a feeling of failure and uncertainty regarding the future.

The church is also facing a crisis, perhaps brought on by the above, regarding its identity and its continued relevance in a fast-changing and consumer-orientated world. This world has, on the face of it at least, little time for, or interest in, God, religion and, perhaps most especially, the church.

One might be tempted to say that the church has reacted badly to this, by retreating into itself and, possibly even more seriously, by forgetting what it is here for. Although not all churches have reacted in the same way, generally speaking the church as a whole has largely lost its way and does not know which way to turn next. It has put up the shutters to the world outside and instead has begun to put its efforts into its survival and the maintenance of its structures. Many ministers (perhaps especially the full-time variety) have reacted similarly and are increasingly out of touch with the world outside the church. I know myself that it is easy to become so busy with church related matters that I can end up, if I am not careful, spending days and even weeks on end only speaking to and being with 'church people'. I am retreating into that which I find most comfortable and at home in. It is a safe place to be – it's familiar territory and I know where I am here and I know the people around and about me. Yet, the mission of the church is and never has been to do or be this. The mission of the church – the Christian mission is to the world at large.

Of course, it is not easy managing decline, which is what many ministers have to do today. We share the frustrations and the uncertainties faced by the church on a daily basis. Whereas the average church member is reminded of these things but once a week or so, the church minister lives with them every single day and this is the cause of much depression and 'burn-out'.

The URC – 'Ministry for Mission'

David Peel, in his book *'Ministry for Mission'*, says that the URC has a particular problem with regard to 'mission', in that the very nature of our reformed tradition means that we are better at 'gathering' than 'dispensing'. As he says, 'John Calvin's ecclesiology underpins the traditional Reformed model of the gathered church. The church, according to Calvin, is constituted where people assemble to hear the Word preached and the Sacraments properly administered.'

So the Reformed church has historically been a church that welcomes people into it, but is less used to searching them out. What David Peel suggests is a return to our 'ancient Catholic roots', whereby we recognise again that the 'church is found where Christ is present'. For Peel, 'the church is constituted by its missionary as well as its worshipping life'. We are challenged to become a missionary church, to be more outward-looking and less-inward looking: 'Our great challenge is to liberate the gospel from its institutionalisation in the church and in the process put a renewed sense of purpose back into being church'.

Peel gives examples from the New Testament of possible missionary models we might use, such as Jesus' call for his disciples to be like salt, light and leaven in the world. He also talks about some of the problems with the URC structures and what is meant by the oft-quoted phrase 'the priesthood of all believers'. Peel suggests that the word 'vocation' is better utilised here rather than 'priesthood' or even 'ministry', when considering the discipleship of all church members.

For Peel, the eldership is a ministry that needs to be rediscovered and properly utilised in the URC. This is 'one of the distinctive elements of Reformed ecclesiology that might commend itself to the other churches we meet on the ecumenical pilgrimage.' Peel even goes so far as saying that this model of Reformed eldership might be an example that other denominations may wish to copy in the future. However, I wonder how realistic this view really is? Most denominations find it strange, to say the least, that we ordain our elders and I think that the fact that the model has not yet been copied by any other denomination is indicative of the way in which others view it. Whilst the model of deacon is widely understood and accepted across the (Protestant) denominations, eldership is still only to be found within the URC.

Conversely, Peel has little positive to say of our NSMs (and also our SMs, at least in part). NSMs, he says, have been used too much to 'plug the gaps' within ministerial deployment, thus hiding longer-term problems. When they move on, they tend to leave behind vacancies that are subsequently difficult to fill. However, none of this is the fault of NSMs, it seems to me. It is, rightly or wrongly, District Councils that identify pastorates for NSMs and then place them there. It is, therefore, the District Councils who are 'plugging gaps' (if indeed that is what is happening), not NSMs. Most District Councils are only too delighted when a NSM offers their services freely to the District, but Peel seems not to recognise this fact at all.

His second critique of the non-stipendiary ministry is the way in which, through it, we have, 'openly encouraged the clericalization of some of our best lay people'. He goes on to say that, 'If eldership means what it should mean then, surely, fewer people would feel drawn to non-stipendiary ministry'. But people who become NSMs are called to the ministry of Word and Sacraments, not to eldership, however highly we may view the model. Unfortunately, Peel here seems to be saying that the non-stipendiary ministry is a second-class ministry, mainly for lay-people to take up, probably in later life. He seems not to accept at all that it is as much a valid type of ministry as the stipendiary ministry and the URC has accepted this for many years. I am sure that many NSMs who read this in Peel's book would have been very surprised and disappointed by his attitude. Though he accepts that worker-priests (or MSEs) have a valid and prophetic ministry, he says finally, 'NSMs are of dubious worth to a strategy for the church which is bottom-up rather than top-down.' No wonder NSMs don't always feel their ministry is understood or valued!

Many URC ministers (I believe here he is speaking of SMs predominantly) have, says Peel, knowingly or unwittingly, changed their model of ministry, 'from preacher to counsellor, from teacher to therapist, from pastor to social and community worker; and, most hellish of all, from missionary to manager.' In addition, many ministers are over-burdened by having multi-church pastorates, which contributes to the task of ministry being less effective, especially where eldership is not functioning properly in the local churches. Again, Peel speaks up for a high view of eldership here: 'our ministers will only be able to be liberated to fulfil the requirements of the classic Reformed model of ministry when the eldership is restored, thus providing significant and strategic local church leadership.'

Yet is the classic Reformed model of ministry, with its emphasis on teaching and preaching, the only acceptable model for the URC today? Is it one that will encourage our ministers and our congregations to move away from the world of the church out into the mission field that is the real and secular world of today? I have my doubts about that. I think that this model of ministry still encourages us to be a 'gathered' church, which I thought Peel was encouraging us not to be at the beginning of his book. I also think that many NSMs are showing us another way, another model of ministry, that is much more outward looking, as well as being more acceptable and readily recognised by our sister churches in many other denominations. It is also a model that was successfully utilised by churches and Christian communities many years before the Reformation.

'Invading Secular Space'

The above is the title of a book I found helpful in parts. It is by Martin Robinson and Dwight Smith and gives a very honest description of the church of today and how it might become transformed by becoming far less insular and much more outward looking. In the second part of the book, I thought that far too much space and detail was devoted to examples of the type of leadership needed for a strategy involving intensive church planting, which has been proven to be very successful in some parts of the world, but which I remain to be convinced could be as successful here, not least for the obvious and simple reason that we are already over-churched.

However, the basic premise of the book in the opening pages I very much agreed with, summed up on page 29: 'It can never be sufficient to constantly construct programmes designed to pull people into sacred space, we have to also consider how we might invade secular space.' We must learn to view the world around us differently in mission terms – seeing it as a place where God already is. It thus becomes for us not a place of threat, but a place of possibility. This sounds simple, yet might be the spark for the beginning of a paradigm shift for the people of our churches.

It was very early on in its life that the mission of the church began to change radically. Robinson and Smith suggest that it was perhaps as early as the fourth century that the Christian mission began to become the preserve of the institution rather than the whole people of God. Clericalism began and suddenly the church's mission was placed in the hands of professionals rather than the ordinary 'lay' person. Mission was suddenly something that someone else did – someone who was properly trained and prepared for the task. This, for Robinson and Smith, was a crucial change: 'The nature of the church began to shape the mission of the church rather than mission giving shape to the church'.

In many ways, our churches today still believe that mission is something for others, especially the clergy, to do, for, after all, they are the professionals. On my sabbatical, I met an Anglican (Revd John Goodchild) responsible for the training of OLMs (Ordained Local Ministers) in Norfolk, who said that one of the biggest mistakes the church ever made was the professionalisation of its clergy. This dis-empowered the rest of the church, the community of which suddenly began to look to others to do the things that they had hitherto always done and shared in together. What is needed is a return to the mission that inspires the church, not the church (and its associated professionals) that inspires (and does) the mission.

Francis Dewar also talks about this in his book *'Called or collared'* (also see below), where he also draws upon the writings of Edward Schillebeeckx, and especially *'Ministry, a Case for Change'*. In the first ten centuries of the church's history, it was the local Christian community that had the chief part to play in the choice of its leader. Ordination was seen in terms of an appointment and election of a local leader from amongst a local community. It had nothing to do with the bestowal of some special power, which was the recipients' personal possession for the rest of their lives. It was not until medieval times that there came about a change in people's understanding of what ordination meant.

So, in the early centuries of the Christian church, clergy were simply leaders drawn from the communities where they were to serve and in whose choice the community had a big say. Whether a person chosen in this way had an inward sense of calling to be a church leader was very much secondary, by far the most important thing was that a job needed to be done – by someone. If there was a change in the leader, then the new person became ordained and the one leaving the position simply became a layman again.

One significant effect of the lone leader in the churches is an obvious one, that so often the gifts of the many are not recognised and developed. In such structures (which are all too common in many churches) the goal very often becomes not empowerment but submission.

The short paragraph on page 104 of *'Invading Secular Space'* perhaps simplifies Christian history to a certain extent, but it also says a great deal about mission, thus I quote it in full below:

'Christianity grew in the first few centuries, not through the effectiveness of a professional leadership, but by the patient, consistent witness of ordinary traders, soldiers, civil servants and slaves, who carried the faith with them wherever they travelled in the world. The equipping of the saints to be active participants in the mission of God is a primary principle of mission.'

It is interesting to note that, whilst the authors of *'Invading Secular Space'* suggest that the main reason for the existence of the church is 'not bigger churches, more people, bigger budgets and more programmes' (pp. 92-3), all the examples they give later in the book are of very large churches, or churches that have closed and then re-opened and been very successful (like the [un-named] URC church quoted on p. 83). However, it is rightly pointed out that the 'Five Marks of Mission' make clear that 'the success of the church as institution must never be our focus, but (rather) the mission impact of what the institution of the church accomplishes'. As is stated later in the book (p.176), the success of a church is 'measured more by how many people and how much leadership a church is able to release into opportunities outside of the ongoing maintenance of church life.'

The authors suggest that the church needs a new missionary paradigm that centres neither on the church, nor the minister, but rather on the world outside. The new paradigm 'necessitates a shift from institution to movement, from structures that invite people into sacred space to an infectious spirituality that invades secular space' (p.109). The difficulty about embracing this new paradigm is simply that, for so many of us (but perhaps especially ministers), the old one constantly calls us back. The church so often thinks of itself as the reason, focus and end of ministry and mission. 'In truth, the church is not the object of ministry, but is instead the instrument of the ministry into the world, which is the true object of ministry of the church' (p.184).

In part reflecting upon 1 Corinthians 12:7-27, the authors' sum up: 'The goal of leadership is to empower and release the whole body of Christ in such a way that the creation of movement is the result. Mobilisation and multiplication, not attraction and addition, are the hallmarks of this kind of people movement.'

There is so much that I agreed with in this book that I very much warmed to its overall theme and critique of the church today. How strange, then, to come to the conclusion that what is needed today is a strategy of intensive church planting. Obviously, such a strategy can be very effective in some parts of the world. This has indeed been proven in such countries as the Ukraine and India (two examples highlighted in the book). Yet the culture and context of such large post-communist or un-churched countries such as these are very different from the UK. The last thing we need here is more churches!

To be fair, the authors do address this question. Their answer is broadly to suggest that church planting does not necessarily mean more churches, but the revitalisation of older congregations, or the planting of cell or house churches. Yet I still remain to be convinced on this point. What is right for Asia or the countries of the former Soviet bloc, is not necessarily right for us.

'In the Name of Jesus', by Henri Nouwen

I think I stumbled across this little book almost by accident, whilst searching for something else. Yet, as I began to read it, I realised that I'd picked up a little gem of a book. In only eighty pages of large-print type, there is so much said about Christian leadership and mission that I thought was very important.

Nouwen seems to have quite an insight into the current realities and oft-experienced pressures of Christian ministry within today's secular driven world. Ministers can indeed experience low self-esteem and depression. We can feel irrelevant, unwanted and worthless, as if nothing we try has any effect or impact upon people. Being a minister is indeed a challenge, to say the least, in today's world (yet I'd also want to say, incidentally, that so are many other people's jobs and vocations). Nouwen's call to ministers is, however, to remain faithful to the Christ who calls us, even if we are not, on the face of it, very successful in the eyes of the world.

Much more the measure of a good minister is he or she who has a desire to 'dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate word and to taste fully God's infinite goodness.'

In his further work, *'The Wounded Healer'*, Nouwen also calls Christian leaders to identify the suffering in their own hearts and minds with that in those they serve – indeed to make this the starting point of their service. As he says, 'The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.'

Nouwen states that all leaders are tempted by power and influence. Even Christian leaders face this temptation, perhaps because 'power offers an easy substitute for the hard work of love.' It is, he says, 'easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.' What Christian leaders need to learn is to 'live the incarnation', i.e. to live in the body of Christ, the corporate body of the community and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It may perhaps seem obvious, but surely those who are best able to live in the 'body of Christ' are those who also work and live within the broader 'body of the community'. As I have previously suggested, many ministers are simply cut off from the world of much of their community. I sometimes think that ministers have retreated into the world of their churches, perhaps because they feel safe there. Like the church itself, it is all too easy for us to retreat into ourselves, our limited world and then even to put up the shutters. Yet Christ calls us to be in touch with the world – the suffering world, the fearful world, the doubting world – and to begin to make a difference there. Yet we can only do this if we ourselves know suffering, fear and doubt. That is Nouwen's challenge and it is a very real one.

'Called or Collared', by Francis Dewar

This book is all about the nature and meaning of vocation, specifically the vocation to ordained ministry. What I liked about it was that it made no presumptions and did not attempt to define the notion of being called in any narrow sense at all.

Dewar talks a great deal about our own potential creativity as human beings and how these can be quashed by the expectations of others. He believes that every Christian has a personal calling to do something special for and with God. This can be interpreted in many ways, yet, when it is given voice within a church context, it is so often interpreted in one way, as a call to the ministry of word and sacrament.

Yet, as Dewar says (on page 8), 'You are called by (God) to deliver *your* message, to sing *your* song, to offer *your* act of love: and that is not a predetermined path.' Though we are called to total self-giving (as Christ was), this will mean different things to different people, depending upon 'the gift' that we have to offer. 'The inner sense of call is always something that will be drawn from within you, not something provided for you out there. It is always a call to take the risk of enacting your true self in some way for the enrichment of others.' Throughout our lives, says Dewar, God is always calling each of us to respond to him in a personal way, to give more and more of what we are and could be.

For Dewar, the personal calling of God arises from the interplay between three factors: the person you hiddenly are and could be; the needs of others; and God, whose invitation to you is to put the one at the service of the other. Yet so often the weight of other people's expectations and projections becomes so great that we give in and become simply what others expect of us.

I wonder if this is what has basically happened with me over ten years in the ministry. At the outset of responding to the call to ministry, I always said that I didn't want to become a 'churchy' person, even as a minister. Yet, try as one might not to, the truth of it is that I have become moulded by others' expectations and demands into what many might see (from the outside) as a very ordinary

minister. Not that there is anything wrong with being an ordinary minister, of course, it is just that at the outset of my journey to ministry, I could not have imagined becoming one!

Sometimes, says Dewar, congregations behave very much like children, 'and the clergy frequently collude with this by playing an unhelpfully parental role – usually in order to bolster their own weak sense of worth – and the effect of this is to prevent any real growth taking place at all.' Sometimes, it's not the clergy that people become dependent upon, but rather the church building, or the furnishings, or the choir – 'almost anything you can think of – except God.'

I found this book a challenging but enlightening read. It speaks to one at a very personal level, and the challenge throughout to be yourself – to 'sing your own song' (and no-one else's) – is one that spoke very deeply to me. I wish I'd read it years ago. God calls us to be none other than ourselves and if we find that suddenly we are ourselves no longer, then something has changed, something has gone away, something needs rectifying, before the spark that is 'me' goes out completely.

'Ministers at Work'

This is a title of a journal published by CHRISM (the National Association of Christians in Secular Ministry). I read many a back copy of this journal and was very much inspired by many of the articles I came across. Most were written by MSE's (Ministers in Secular Employment) in many and varying situations. The articles were equally varied, but also honest and informative. They were sometimes critical and sometimes humorous and yet always thought provoking. This is a journal very much for those who are enthusiastic (if not passionate) about their secular employment being their prime focus for ministry.

I particularly liked the phrase 'tentmaker', which is one of many terms used to describe ordained clergy who are engaged in work other than full-time 'parish' ministry. The term comes from a biblical reference in Acts 18:3 where we learn that St Paul supported himself by making tents. The tentmaker perceives ministry as taking place in both church and secular contexts. Indeed, as Davis Fisher points out in an article in *'Ministers at Work'* (April 2002), 'The presence of the ordained tentmaker invites faith based dialogue in a neutral setting, especially with people who are not church-goers.'

I was also very interested in the following quotation, from the late Revd Michael Ramsay (the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury), quoted in the same article:

'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...'

This is to say that what we call our tentmakers today belong most truly to the apostolic foundation, and we may learn from them of that inward meaning of priesthood which we share with Jesus Christ.'

Yet what so often seems to be the case is that this particular kind of ministry is 'hidden', not understood and not valued by much of the wider church. People do not always understand why it is that ministers working within the secular world need to be ordained – for they are not seen or recognised as doing 'church work'. It is this lack of understanding and recognition that so frustrates many MSE's (and NSM's).

What is often called for in *'Ministers at Work'* is not only an openness by the church to recognise MSEs, in all their varying roles, but that MSEs themselves should become a lot more visible than they currently are in the life of the wider church. I think that this is indeed vital for the church as a whole.

As Dr Forrest Lowry states in a further article (January 2003), "Tentmaking' in God's eyes is ministry..... We all need to remember that God called every believer to full-time Christian service. Every believer is called to minister.... There is no 'secular' and 'spiritual' dimension in God's vocabulary.'

Conclusion

There is an interesting little paragraph in the book, *'Being a Priest Today'*, by C Cocksworth and R Brown, that talks about the role and calling of a presbyter (ordained minister). The authors write:

'Our calling to build up the life of the church is not an excuse to distance ourselves from the life of the world. In fact, it should propel us into the world so that we can model the priestly attention to the world which is the calling of all Christians as they serve the Christ who gave himself up for all.'

Yet in practice I would say that this rarely happens. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that more often than not the opposite occurs. Ministers become so fully immersed in the life of the church that the world outside can almost become alien to them. We may not want this to happen, but such are the pressures placed upon us by the church that it becomes almost inevitable.

And then another thing happens. This strange place we inhabit (the church) becomes comfortable and familiar to us. We know the people who come here and they know us. They also expect us to reside here and ask questions if we're not here. It is, in the end, far less challenging to be here, amongst friends, than a frankly quite scary world outside – a world we find we know less and less about. Yet, this is not good for us and it's not good for our churches, which is precisely why we so need the tentmakers, MSEs, worker-priests and NSMs. Indeed, I would say that the church needs them like never before.

Yet the church seems in many ways to be suspicious of MSEs and NSMs, despite the fact that, as long ago as 1972, Michael Ramsay (also quoted above) said in his classic work, *'The Christian Priest Today'*, that ministers in secular employment belong most truly to the apostolic foundation. It is surely well worth remembering that most of Jesus' followers were, by our standards, MSEs.

It is also interesting to note the results of a survey carried out in 1993 (*'Ministers at Work'*, Oct 2001). Of 400 working Christians, most thought that church life and work life failed to connect. Yet, 92% of those saw their work, at least in part, as a vocation, and 89% saw it as integral to the mission of the church. This is hardly surprising. Anyone with a reasonably strong faith will not want to confine it to Sundays, but the working NSM or MSE has a unique opportunity to make these connections.

So why the continuing suspicions regarding NSMs in the church? In another article in *'Ministers at Work'* (Oct 2001) Margaret Joachim (an MSE) points to a number of reasons as to why stipendiary ministers can be suspicious of MSEs. These include the following:

1. MSEs are amateur ministers.
2. MSEs don't understand the real pressures of clerical life.
3. MSEs want to bring secular management techniques into the church.
4. MSEs aren't involved in pastoral matters in the church.
5. MSEs are a threat to SMs, as they are unpaid – they do the work for free.

I think much the same could be said of NSMs and indeed some of these criticisms were alluded to in response to some of my questions in the questionnaire. This kind of suspicion and misunderstanding is not everywhere, of course. There are many NSMs in the URC, as no doubt there are in other denominations, who feel highly valued and accepted, but there is still an underlying suspicion and occasional mistrust of NSMs/MSEs.

It is in part because of this that there has been a slow but sizeable drift to the stipendiary ministry from those in NSM over the years (in the URC and in other denominations). NSMs/MSEs still very often feel frustrated and marginalized in their role. John Mantle makes a comparison here with liberation theology in an article in *'Ministers at Work'*. He says that as in South America in the 1960s and 70s, it is out of a similar experience of oppression and marginalisation that NSMs/MSEs are developing a new kind of theology, ministry and way of being church, which is not widely recognised or affirmed by much of the wider church.

One misguided image that MSEs directly challenge is the view that clergy are primarily responsible for the church and laity primarily responsible for the world. This image is criticised by the Roman Catholic author and theologian E P Hahnenberg in his book, *'Ministries, a Relational Approach'*. Here he says that Vatican II challenged the whole church, but more especially the laity, to engage with the world outside the church. But highlighting the secular nature of the layperson also had the effect, in some parts of the church, of hardening the divide between a 'secular laity and the sacred priest'. Hahnenberg calls for a more relational and inclusive approach to ministry, whereby the entire people of God are characterised by a positive relationship with the secular dimension: 'Isn't the starting point for talking about ministry the whole church, the people of God and the body of Christ? And isn't it the entire church – clergy and laity – that has responsibility to serve the world?'

Hahnenberg reflects upon the doctrine of the Trinity, which, he says, serves as an example of a relational approach to ministry. A discussion regarding ministry should not begin with either 'the 'being' of the minister (ontology) or with the 'doing' of the minister (function) but with the category of relationship (which combines both)'. Ministers come to be who they are in relationships of service, and relationships of service shape a minister. 'These relationships flow from God, through Christ in the Spirit, and continue outward to others in the church and in the world – a movement that is celebrated in sacrament and liturgy.'

Clifford Bellamy (a Methodist minister and MSE) talks positively about 'Sector Ministry' (a now defunct Methodist term for MSE) in a short article in the book, *'What is a Minister?'*, by P Luscombe and E Shreeve. There are some very interesting insights within this article, including a summary of the reasons some people gave who felt called to MSE. For some, it was the need to fulfil a side to their calling they felt was impossible within the church. Others felt isolated from the everyday world in Circuit ministry, or frustrated at the traditional routine of pastoral ministry. Yet others wished to use the expertise gained in the secular world used within the ministry in a particular way.

Also interesting is the description of an MSE as a 'bridge person' between the realms of church and world. However as is pointed out by Bellamy, a bridge needs to be supported at both ends – by the church and the world. Adequate support, as we have found, is not always forthcoming, but is very necessary in order for this ministry to grow and develop. If MSEs do not feel well enough supported by the church, there is danger that they may begin to become somewhat 'detached' from it. Feelings of isolation are a common problem for MSEs/NSMs. Bellamy quotes one such minister, 'I have no role in the Circuit.... I have felt underused throughout my ministry simply because Circuits are not structured to cope with people like me.'

Bellamy makes some telling remarks in the conclusion to his article that I very much warmed to. There is a great need today, he says, for ministers to be deployed in more imaginative, creative and flexible ways. The URC's *'Equipping the Saints'* report also very much affirms this and the proposed increase in the number of 'Special Category Ministers' (URC General Assembly 2005) should also allow this to happen. Bellamy quotes a former President of the Methodist Conference, Revd Dr Eric W Baker, 'The danger that may lurk in bold experiments is nothing like so serious as the certain disaster if we don't experiment.'

In the past, the church's mission has often seemed to concentrate on gathering people in, rather than being in the world where people are. As the book *'Invading Secular Space'* affirmed so well, this simply has to change. The church needs to continue, not to narrow, but to widen its perspective – to be more and more where the people are. It is no longer acceptable to believe that people will come to us in the church; we must go to them. In order to begin to do this effectively, we very much need 'those who can point to the sacred within the secular', or those who can 'keep the rumour of God alive' (Bellamy)

This is surely what MSEs and many NSMs endeavour to do in their ministry. They need our encouragement and affirmation, our support, understanding and prayers.

MSEs and NSMs may still be treading a lonely path in some respects, yet they are also pioneers of a ministry which is historically apostolic, often prophetic in the way it reaches out to people beyond the confines of the church today and which is thus vital to the future of the church of tomorrow.

A Personal Post-Script

As many will no doubt have realised, this has been, all along, a personal journey and exploration, as well as an 'academic' one. This has been a reflection upon my own call to ministry as much as an exploration of others' experience of ministry. I am still working through some of the issues and implications of my findings for me personally.

As the world is ever-changing, so the call to be involved somehow in God's wider mission to the world is an ever-changing one, leading people on to discover new things, new truths, new possibilities, new challenges. Sometimes it seems as if the church is slow to catch up with some of these challenges, sometimes it still seems as if the church is only interested in itself, in maintenance rather than mission, survival rather than a searching for new ways to be a pilgrim people of God.

It can indeed be very frustrating to be a minister in today's church – not always, of course, there are highs as well as lows as with almost anything in life – but sometimes it does seem as if nothing will ever really change in the life of the church which is struggling to make sense of its role and purpose in today's world. Perhaps it was ever thus, though the URC's *'Catch the Vision'* report also highlights the problems very honestly in its description of the current situation with regard to the church, and specifically ministry in the church, thus:

'Ministry (there) should be challenging and fulfilling. However, we still hear of churches that regard a minister as their private chaplain, or that refuse determinedly to engage with the complexities of mission in post-Christendom. Some ministers are in the difficult position of knowing that the secular institutions that they encounter and work with are much closer to the Kingdom of God than the congregations to which they minister. Equally, some ministers are 'trapped' in the service of the church, bewildered by change, spiritually exhausted, yet unable to seek employment elsewhere because of the manse system. Others are strained and stretched by the complexity of living on the edge between viability and implosion on the shifting border between Christian spirituality and post-Christian culture.' (Para. 41)

It has thus been very gratifying to discover that there are other ways to respond to the call of God, whilst remaining faithful to oneself and one's understanding of the whole concept of vocation. I do feel as if I need to rediscover how to 'sing my own song' (F Dewar) again. I do feel as if change is in the air and I want to grasp it with both hands. I do think that the church has to 'get out there' (into the world) and find new ways of being church. I do think that we've still got far too many churches (and more especially church buildings) that are dragging us down and getting in the way of our mission.

Whilst I feel on the way to embracing some of this in a new way, I am not quite there just yet. However, writing this report, and the associated reading I have engaged in, as well as some of my other experiences on my sabbatical (such as the retreats I shared in and the people I met with along the way), have all helped enormously in enabling me to think seriously about the possibility of setting out in a somewhat new direction in my life. Although I have no clear ideas as yet about where this may eventually lead me, I do believe that this is still part of my vocation; that God is guiding me along every step of the way and that God is most certainly still full of surprises.