

Discipleship and ministry in the workplace

Megan Smith

Over the past year I have been trying to understand something of the difference both Christian discipleship, but more specifically, ordained ministry, make to a Christian in the secular workplace. This article represents a summary of my reflections through personal Bible study (mainly the Gospel of John) and reading on the core principles underlying that discipleship and ministry that I believe make workplace ministry distinctive. After a brief introduction to the history of ministry in secular employment, and the specific context of my work (which naturally highly influenced the direction of the reflections), the reflections are divided into 3 key areas: trust, motivation, and foundation for actions. A conclusion is then offered.

Introduction

Discussions of ordained ministers continuing to undertake secular work inevitably, usually quickly, lead to the precedent and teaching of St Paul. Paul frequently emphasizes the manual work that he and his companions continue to undertake, despite their clear role as itinerant apostles (e.g. 1 Cor 4:11; 1 Thess 2:9; 1 Cor 9:6). He also recommends this as the course of action for others in the young churches he has established (1 Thess 4:11). The principle reasons for this seem to be a lack of monetary dependence on others (therefore for him and his companions also conferring freedom of action and speech, as they are not beholden to any man) as well as affirming that honest, diligent, hard work is a part of the order of life created by God.

Although not explicitly stated in the New Testament, it has been purported that Paul also used his tent-making/leather-working workshop as a setting for missionary preaching (1). Paul's choice to work as a craftsman (reviled by the aristocratic classes) has also been credited with transforming the attitude of the church to work (2). The context of ministry in secular employment (MSE) today, although consistent with these principles, encompasses wider issues of ministry and the nature of church. As the early church became richer (with its adoption by the Roman Empire) the trend became for clergy to leave their secular trades. It was not until the 1930s that the issue of ministry in the workplace returned to the agenda of the church (in the UK) with Barry writing that:

"the secular tasks of the world are integral elements in the life of the Church....else holiness is a word with no meaning. The family, the professions and council changers, the technical skill on which modern life depends, are not merely fields for experiment in which to test our loyalty to the Church. They are themselves the material of Churchmanship. That is to say, it is not merely a question of carrying out into life amid the temptations of the world. It is a question of doing the world's work and responding to its opportunities with insight cleansed and motive directed by the grace of God through Jesus Christ" (3).

This final sentence is prophetic of what MSE has become for most who engage in it. It took however another 25 years for the concept of self-supporting ministry to be developed in practice, and initially that was purely in support of the parochial system (4). Individual clergy who have found themselves in this position seem to have responded to their understanding of their call and developed workplace ministry without any strategic direction from the wider church. Some attempts have been made to describe the role of the MSE, such as that by General Synod in 1985:

"listening to colleagues with troubles and offering comfort and counsel, but also in terms of exploring for themselves and discussing with others, for example, how sin and salvation are experienced and talked about in terms of daily work and leisure. Such people are missionaries on the frontiers of the Church. They deserve support and encouragement, not merely with fine words but also by action and administration." (5).

But as each workplace situation is unique, so it is more likely that unifying principles on which MSE are based might be found, rather than a unifying description of a role.

The specific workplace context behind this reflection is the National Health Service, where most staff are highly motivated to offer good quality care and support to their patients, regardless of their spiritual motivation. It is therefore a good context to look more critically at the principles that might

make MSE distinctive. Writing as a consultant physician, the context is one of management (both people and systems) rather than just the delivery of care. Most employees work long hours with the associated physical tiredness with the stress of a pressurized and uncertain management situation (changing almost daily).

In this context of both MSE and my specific background the reflections which follow naturally grouped into the 3 main focuses of trust and security, motivation and foundations for actions. The Bible reading has mainly focused on John's gospel with occasional excursions into the minor prophets, particularly Habakkuk and Malachi.

Reflections

Trust

The workplace minister will be subject to the same stressors as other fellow workers and a fundamental necessity is therefore to find, and offer to others, a basis for maintaining equilibrium within that environment not significantly disrupted by the stressors.

The OED defines trust as "firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something" (noun) and also to "commit (someone or something) to the safekeeping of" (verb) (7). A firm faith and trust in God, which is not shaken by difficult circumstances, is the fundamental foundation for workplace ministry. Henri Nouwen speaks of the invitation to a life of prayer which is the invitation to live in the midst of the world without being caught up in the net of wounds and needs (8). This is similar in some ways to the prayer of Jesus in John 17:13-18 that we might be in the world but not affected by the pressures of the world around. Another picture, inspired by John 7:32-36 is that of living in the centre of a whirlwind where there is perfect stillness despite the devastation which is going on around. Any movement away from the eye of the whirlwind immediately leads to one being buffeted by the storm. Being a minister at work is about interpreting the storm through the eyes of God, rather than interpreting God through the storm.

If one is in the workplace as a response to the call of God then he groundedness and security needed should lead to intercession and waiting before God in prayer for answers if they are not apparent at the time as with Habakkuk. He held the complaints of the world before God when he could not answer them himself "I shall stand on the ramparts and look to see what answer is given" (Hab 2:1)

It is folly for the workplace minister to feel that they be able to offer a solution to the stresses of those around them, rather they must point people in the direction where they can find their own groundedness and serve as a living example themselves. There is also the responsibility to hold these people before God in prayer. It may be tempting to think that the attendant stresses of the modern world are new and unique to it. Although the exact circumstances are different as society changes and as technological development increases pace, the stress of the job of ministering the word of God in difficult situations where people do not even acknowledge Him is not new and is in fact very similar to that of the Old Testament prophets as well as Jesus himself.

If this grounding in God can truly be achieved then the whole perspective of the minister's worldview will change, as God becomes the source of all life, inspiration and security both personally and professionally. In the story of the feeding of the 5000 (John 6:7-9) Philip saw the problem as having 5000 people to feed. Andrew however saw the resources that were available of two fishes and five loaves and gave them to Jesus. This difference in perspective is key to a sustainable trust in God. A virtuous circle of trust and belief can then be allowed to develop as experience of answered prayer feeds further faith.

The gospel goes on to record that Jesus later promised that anything that was asked in his name would be done (John 14:13). It is interesting that although resources are available, they have to be requested rather than simply automatically being provided. This supports the principle that a fundamental component of MSE is intercessory prayer, both for individuals, but also for organizations and the work of the minister him/herself. This cycle of trust and belief seems to be something that Jesus particularly tried to engender in his disciples. He did not reveal his plans all at once to his

disciples (John 16:17-18). Although it might appear that revelation of plans and the future might alleviate some stress it would not necessarily lead to the deeper grounding that is required for long-term sustainability of ministry.

Motivation

As with all ministry the motivation to minister in the workplace must come as a response to the call of God to that ministry. I would define the difference between a Christian living out their faith as a disciple of Christ in the workplace and someone who is developing a work-based ministry to be that the minister has a calling to focus specifically on the development of a ministry, whereas the disciple is to live for Christ in the workplace and to take ministry opportunities as they arise without necessarily being focused on the development of ministry. This is in keeping with the more traditional parochial-based view of specific ministry in the parish, where all have a calling to minister, but the ordained minister has a particular role in developing ministry.

One of the key themes of the prophet Malachi is the expectation of God that we will give him the best of all that we can offer. That therefore has to include the best of our work time and resources. This sacrificial view of motivation answers concern that developing workplace ministry is in any way related to status in comparison with others in the workplace. It is in fact the following after the incarnation of Jesus, dwelling on earth and sharing the vulnerability and difficulties of all people. The basis of Jesus' incarnational ministry was that of an unceasing love the world. John 15:35 telling of love involving laying down life for friends, is eclipsed by John 3:16's statement of God loving the world to the extent that he sent his only son to die for it. The challenge of the workplace minister is to have that non-variable love for those within the workplace in the entirety of their being even though some will be very difficult to get on with. The drive of that motivation of love allows for the continuation of ministry even though the world may be in opposition to it (John 15:18).

The ongoing unceasing love of the world led to some of the conflict with Jesus in his ministry. However Hosea 6:6 suggests that ongoing steady loyalty is better than dramatic bouts of commitment. Workplace ministry therefore must by definition be a long-term undertaking rather than being about grand projects with obvious immediate results.

Jesus was very focused in his ministry stating that his role was to do the will of his father who had sent him (John 4:36-38). Obedience to that call and performing that work was then life sustaining rather than life draining. Jesus seems at times to work without a break and states that his role was simply to see what God is doing and to do the same (John 5:17). The workplace Minister in a sense therefore has to function without agenda, but rather pray for open eyes to see the work of God and fit in with it. Working on the basis of this motivation a potential conflict for the workplace minister, indeed any Christian disciple in the workplace, is the need to do what is right, not what pleases everyone (John 19:12). This may well therefore leave the minister not being the most popular person with either the employer or their colleagues. To compromise would however be to compromise the essence of the ministry. This is a particular reason why the recommendation of the Anglican Church that a minister in secular employment should have that role formally recognized by the employer (9) is potentially undermining of the basis of ministry itself.

Foundation for actions

There seem to be three strands that should underlie all the actions of the workplace minister: firstly prayer, secondly thankfulness, and thirdly recognition of God in the middle of situations. Henri Nouwen suggests that the busier we are in this world the more essential is the life of contemplative prayer (10). In some ways this relates to the concept of living in the eye of the storm discussed earlier but also much more clearly focuses on the necessity of prayer. Habakkuk used this as a deliberate strategy without which he was not able to perform his prophetic ministry. When that prayer does lead to someone speaking and acting as the messenger of the Lord of hosts, people will hang on to those words (Malachi 2:7).

The life of prayer engenders the mindset that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). There is no place for valuing human reputation (John 12:43) as following the ministry of Christ may well lead one into conflict with the desire for human approval. John 13:12 –17 provides

a reminder that we are primarily there to serve. This again suggests there is no place for official recognition of ministry by the employer. Official approval of the role of minister may lead to conflict when there is need to speak out prophetically against some aspect of the organization/employer. Even with no written directives against this, there would probably be a tacit expectation for the minister to ultimately support the employer.

Jesus was not at all defensive in the face of authorities, which profoundly disagreed with him (John 18:19-24), as his sole concern was doing the work of his father, and his complete authority came from that relationship. This does not however mean that controversy has to be courted. There were times when Jesus avoided conflict (John 7:1&2). Although human approval is not a good foundation or motivation for ministry, St Paul suggests that the reputation of the gospel is powerfully communicated when we have a reputation for good conduct (Philippians 1:27). The fundamental question to the workplace minister and particularly workplace priest is "is God glorified" (John 13:31). Priestly vocation is to glorify God in all we do (John 7:18). The role of the minister therefore in prayer is simply to continually ask God to intervene in the world and carry out his purposes. This allows God to look after his own reputation. Denying this is colluding with the fallacy that man is self-made and self-sufficient. It will also aid us as we are called to dwell in Christ (John 15:7). There is particular example in John 17 that we should pray directly and unashamedly what is on our hearts. That must apply also to be difficulties and pressures of workplace ministry.

Another key theme of St Paul is thankfulness to God regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. He was particularly qualified to speak on this due to his own frequent mistreatment and imprisonment. He gives particular instruction in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 of instruction to thankfulness in all circumstances and also again in Philippians 4:4 with the injunction to rejoice in the Lord always. The consequence of both these deliberate actions is that it enables one to stay focused on the power and authority of God in the world rather than to focus on the difficulties and stresses of the world. Remembrance of who God is and also what God has done in previous experience increases faith and stamina but also again powerfully communicates a source of hope to those to whom one is ministering.

The final of the three components of the foundation for actions is that of seeing God in the middle of situations. This is a natural consequence of building trust and security in God alongside the discussion that has already been put forward about motivation and doing the will of the Father. Pausing and asking for God to reveal himself in the middle of difficult situations is a natural result of contemplative prayer. It removes any concern about the outcome of the situation if it is believed that God is working in all situations but the issue for the minister is to discern where this is and then to join in that work. It also forms the basis on which the practicalities of the specific role for the workplace minister, which will vary according to setting and time. It suggests a fluid and responsive ministry, with less emphasis on strategy and vision that might be the case in other areas of ministry.

Conclusion

My conclusion from a year of reflecting and reading is simply that ministry in the secular workplace is a focused outworking of discipleship in that context. The principles underlying workplace ministry and discipleship are no different from those underpinning any other context, but they have a very focused application. The personal stressors that I face at work are the same as those faced by colleagues. Workplace ministry therefore involves a responsibility to find security in the God of peace in the middle of the situation and then drawing others towards that anchor. A secure and sustained relationship with God is necessary for all Christian ministry, but these reflections would suggest that that is even more applicable to MSE. A task orientated "job description" would be difficult to draw for such a role, which may be one of the reasons why it is the church administration seems to struggle at times with it. It also means that asking a secular employer to provide official backing is likely to be bizarre to them, as well as the points discussed earlier of the potential detrimental effect on ministry of such sanction.

This "being" model of ministry is much more in keeping with a more catholic view of priesthood than one I would subscribe to, but does seem to fit the calling of a minister in secular employment. It

mirrors the incarnational ministry of Christ. The concept of incarnational ministry has begun to be widely accepted in the context of poverty and deprivation (both with urban ministry in the western world, but also the base communities of liberation theology in a wider setting). My understanding is that MSE is in principle very similar, just in a very different context. The minister is to offer a living example of hope in the midst of difficulties and to represent God in the middle of an organisation which has no focus on God, holding people and institutions before the throne of grace.

References:

- Hock RF (1998) in Francis JN & Francis LJ (eds) "Tentmaking - perspectives on self-supporting ministry". Gracewing. p14.
- Vaughan P (1986), in Fuller J & Vaughan P (eds). "Working for the Kingdom – the story of ministers in secular employment". SPCK. P130.
- Barry FR (1935), in Fuller J & Vaughan P (eds). P176.
- Vaughan P (1986), in Fuller J & Vaughan P (eds). p177.
- General Synod paper GS 583 February 1985 para 6
- Seyle, H (1950), "Diseases of adaptation". Wisconsin medical journal 49 (6).
- OED online, www.askoxford.com
- Nouwen H (1999), "The Only Necessary Thing". DLT. p25
- Advisory Board on Ministry (1996), "Regulations for Non-Stipendiary Ministry". ABM policy paper no. 5. Central Board of Finance.
- Nouwen H (1999), "The Only Necessary Thing".