

MSE and Consulting

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Having spent nearly four years now working as a consultant, and part of that time self-employed, I thought I ought to respond to the request in Journal 86, in the hope that I might stimulate further debate.

The key reason why it is important that there are MSEs working as consultants, is that this is what increasingly a large number of people find themselves doing these days. Previously large employers are shedding more and more people, and then finding that they have to resource their activities by using external consultants (many of whom may be the people they have just made redundant !) This is certainly true of my own area in the chemicals, processing and oil & gas industries.

It is part of the calling of an MSE to reflect upon their work situation – its problems and its joys, its tensions and its opportunities – and to articulate the realities of the presence of God (and all the other good things embodied in the CHRISM mission statement). So I am grateful that the question raised about consulting gives us the opportunity to do this, and may enable us to explore some ways to give sense and meaning to others who share a vocation to consultancy.

Consulting is perhaps rather too narrow a focus. So let us not forget that there is, in parallel, a growth in the use of agency staff in many aspects of life and business. These temporary workers may not know where or whether they will be in paid work from one week to the next and are often receiving the lowest possible pay and conditions. There may be parallels to be drawn here – professionals may find there way into consultancy; manual workers are transformed into agency staff. (See my article on the German meeting for an example of agency work).

So how are we to make sense of our role? An important thing that many MSEs have stressed is their exploration of God in their work (not work place) – to focus on our ministry in our secular employment. This exploration of what it means to minister is also made easier if we are not wedded to the idea that the role of the MSE is somehow to transpose the image of the parish priest into the workplace (to “be the Vicar”). I do think that this is a very difficult model to sustain, as it implies a status in the workplace that we do not have – we are there, after all, to do our job like everyone else.

As a consultant (and particularly if self-employed) we are detached from any permanent community. The same is true of agency staff, who may never meet a fellow employee of their own firm. And yet, it is a significant feature of much consultancy work that we are for long or short periods, and often at short notice, plunged into a community, or have to create one for a particular job. We arrive at a client's site and immediately have to work out the group's dynamics, personalities, political factions – no “settling into the parish for 6 months before I make any changes” here. It is, I think a clear ministerial function to be able to achieve this. It is also true that this is not ministry to a captive group of people – they have choices !

What models might we draw from this ? The tired old cliché “I'm a consultant, I'm here to help” may in fact point us to the key – that a consultant is there as a servant. We could clearly spell out a diaconal role in a spirit of service, in the help and support we give to others. It may undoubtedly be that the work we actually do speaks of the new life of the Kingdom of God – the “conversions” that I see in my work on the safety of chemical processes often bears this out. And great sensitivity is often required, for example, following an incident when working with the victim's colleagues. But there is also a priestly role in this work of consultancy – interpreting the reality of others, and acting as a mediator; recognising, and, indeed, celebrating the sacraments of grace at work in the changes which see taking place. This may sound far removed from trying to replicate pastoral parish ministry in the workplace. We also have the liberating perspective of being priest without having to be the leader.

As I write this, I look around for models which might inform this pattern of our itinerant existence – dropping into communities and then moving on, often sharing very deeply with the client's workplace

issues. What comes to mind is the image of the Friar. May be this is something to expand on further!

But the bottom line is that for an MSE to work as a consultant reflects the reality of many peoples' lives in the working world today. It gives us an opportunity to reflect upon it, and opens up yet more models of what it means to minister in work.