

## ***MSE and the scope of ministry***

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A regular theme in the sporadic discussions among MSEs (mostly ordained, it has to be said) in the North West is the questions MSE pose about the nature of ministry itself. Why is it that MSEs so often see ministry differently from local church clergy? The ways in which we as MSEs see ministry (and I use the plural deliberately) beg questions about the relationship between lay and ordained MSEs, between MSEs and other models of ministry (lay as well as ordained), and how MSEs relate to the Churches as institutions.

What follows is not an attempt to say what the relationships and differences of perception are, still less to explain them. Rather it is to set out some suggestions for further discussion, to stir up the pot and see what floats to the surface!

### ***(1) Job and Ministry: a dichotomy***

'Ministry' is often seen as personal and as a personal activity. But is this a proper way to understand it? Job or role has long been recognised as a factor in self-identity in the secular world: "And what do you do?" is a familiar, loaded, question. The question suggests that a particular type of answer is appropriate, one we usually give. "I am a Customs & Excise Officer", would be my normal response (when not being mischievous!). We, and others, seek identity in and from our job, be it title or activity. It is hardly surprising that stipendiary clergy do likewise, so ministry is often defined in terms of the job some ministers are paid to do. 'Ministry' is defined as "mine" and defines the person who exercises it, in the same way as a job.

If, however, we start from the premise of ministry as the work of God through the Body of Christ (a holistic approach) it ceases to be definable in terms of 'job'. This creates a dichotomy where it is used in the way just described. It has become a matter of identity for those in so-called 'full-time ministry' jobs, notably 'local church ministry'. It has become sociological, not theological.

### ***(2) Wider theology of ministry***

The holistic approach acknowledges that ministry will be expressed in different ways, through different individuals and groups, but stresses that ministry belongs to God and is expressed through the Body of Christ as a result of its relationship to and with God. Neither is it to be seen as merely conferred or gifted by God to the Church; it is a product and dynamic of the *relationship* between God and His people. It is therefore also dynamic in how it is manifested. How any one person or group will experience ministry and their part in it can be expected to change over time.

This approach also acknowledges the real dichotomy of the people of God being both the Body of Christ and 'organised' (in an institutional sense). The church as institution needs to know who its officers are and how they relate to each other, but acting as an officer is not synonymous with acting as a minister. The former often overlaps with the latter, and an individual (or group) may be acting in both capacities at the same time. The distinction is however important: the one belongs to the theology of ministry, the other to the theology of the institution (which is emphatically not ecclesiology - to approach the issue in these terms would be to confuse the two capacities).

### ***(3) Relationship of MSE to the local church 'minister'***

The weighting of the above two capacities is shifted. A local church 'minister' (whether ordained or not, stipendiary or not) will normally be operating formally as a representative of the institution for a greater part of their 'ministry' time (included in this are the legal and organisational functions and roles which go with local church ministry). Ministry as expressed through an MSE is likely to be much more weighted towards expression of the ministry of the Body of Christ. Even if in terms of

time spent on traditional 'ministry' activities this is much less than the stipendiary local church 'minister'. The Churches as institutions (and clergy as representatives of the institution, including, I would suggest, a majority of NSMs) have a real problem with this. This appears to be because the dominant models and theologies of ministry are inadequate, seeing ministry as personal and defining it in institutional terms.

MSEs must however be rooted in a local church, grounding 'their' ministry in it. To weaken or lose that grounding is to undermine the identification of ministry as arising from the relationship between God and His people!

One of the principle institutional definitions which under-pin the prevailing models of ministry is the notion of church as representing a community, or, notably in those influenced by the charismatic movement, as a community in itself. The former can be seen in the attachment of the Church of England to the parish system (and other denominations to parallel patterns). There is some merit to both views, but neither is adequate to fit with the complex realities of social organisation (and arguably never were).

'Community' needs to be defined more widely and four basic types are suggested:

- Accident:** typically, a geographic community;
- Affinity:** such as a family, or a widespread group based on common values (such as a religion or nation);
- Association:** those who voluntarily join together for a shared interest (such as a local church, sports club, W.I.);
- Activity:** a shared place or activity of work.

Every individual will 'belong' to several groups, often several of each type. (The re-coil that frequently greets the comparison of 'church' with 'worldly' communities may be understandable, but it simply ignores the evidence). For each person the nexus of belonging represents 'my patch'. For an MSE the characteristics of this patch will generally be quite different from local church ministers; MSEs reach parts of society that local church ministers cannot reach!

#### ***(4) Is there anything necessarily ordained ... ?***

No. Ordination needs too to be thought of in both institutional and representative terms. Any member (or group) of the Body of Christ may be 'ordained' by the local church for a particular expression of ministry. The institution 'ordains' its officers, who are in that respect also representative. Individuals may of course find themselves doubly ordained!

It is no surprise at all that MSEs tend to think of themselves as the same as the rest of the people of God. The surprise is rather that many stipendiary clergy think that they are different.

#### ***(5) MSEs as bridge-builders***

The nexus of communities for an MSE is likely to have much more in common with those of a large proportion of local church congregations than stipendiary local church ministers. In ministry within the congregation, the local community, and all the other communities to which the MSE 'belongs', they will experience being used by God as mediator and bridge-builder. (Local church clergy will also experience this, but in different contexts and ways).

MSEs cross the boundaries between the various communities to which they belong in ways that are more akin to 'the laity' than most stipendiary ministers have the opportunity to.

#### ***(6) Church as institution***

Many of the comments at 2 and 3 above are also relevant here. Ordination can be viewed in terms of its functionality for the institution; this does not exclude or diminish other perspectives, but must

be taken seriously. The institution needs officers to see that its administrative machinery operates correctly, that its symbolic activity is maintained, that the social cohesion of its member (voluntary) associations is upheld. Most, but not all, of these officers are 'Ordained'; most, but not all, are paid. To the extent that clergy are acting as officers of the institution, 'ordination' is the authorisation to act as such. This authority comes from the institution. What therefore are the Churches saying by ordaining some MSEs?

### ***(7) Value added ministry***

Another valid perspective on ministry is that the authority to minister comes in one sense from those who are ministered to. The effectiveness of the ministry of the Body of Christ is hampered without at least the passive consent of those who are ministered to. In this sense it is they who 'ordain' that the ministry is valid. Where an individual or group is seen to represent a 'church' (i.e. a church has formally 'ordained' or authorised in some other way that they should be its representatives) this consent will usually be more freely given.

MSEs find themselves, by virtue of the different communities to which they belong, in positions to both represent and exercise the church's ministry in the communities to which they 'belong'. Local church clergy, and those in Chaplaincy, are usually seen as outsiders, whose contribution (even if they can make one) is likely to be diminished because of this. The MSE is usually 'one of us', the 'vicar' usually 'one of them'.

The MSE is also in a strong position to represent those communities marginalized or excluded from the life of the church as institution or worshipping community by virtue of the lack of day-to-day experience of these communities on the part of the 'professional' minister.

MSEs thus play an essential role in the ministry that has been given to the whole church. They are in a unique position to play a representative role not by being part of the church as institution but as 'one of us' among the people with whom we work. MSEs represent the institution but also represent **to** the institution: they minister to as well as minister for. The authority for both comes from being rooted in the church and in the world of secular employment. If either is lost or diminished, so is the ministry.