

***Michael Ranken,
Minister in Secular Employment, 1928 - 2003***

Dorrie Johnson

Michael Ranken had lived a life of love and laughter and liberation before I knew him. His call to ordination was different from that of many others - for service in a very specific and yet very undefined ministry. His training on the Southwark Ordination Course helped him to clarify his thinking. It wasn't long before the theological questioning which was to engage him for the rest of his life, brought him to the conclusion that there must be more people who felt like he did. He was called to priesthood in the Church of England but with a conviction that he was right to continue working in a secular setting as a food technologist. This was his interest and his concern and the industry, its environs and its people were the focus for his ministry.

This would never be a dual ministry; it was an integrated ministry – the two aspects, church and work, flowed from and into each other. A ministry, focused, deliberate and theologically informed but otherwise not dissimilar to that of any Christian ministering through work. This was a ministry authorised by the Church but practised in an area outside the jurisdiction of the church. A ministry which affirmed the whole world as God's domain, good or bad, busy or slack, dirty or clean, created and fallen but capable of transformation. Michael's ministry and influence stretched over national boundaries and is a story for another time.

From his perception grew an organism called CHRISM (CHRistians In Secular Ministry). It was in responding to Michael's first tentative outreach to find others of a like mind that I first met him and for 20 years or so I have treasured his friendship, read his articles, listened to his reflections, wrestled with his theology, endured his gentle teasing, benefited from his wisdom and been in his prayers as he has been in mine. I have admired him and loved him as did so many who came into contact and were in turn loved by Michael. His heart opened in generosity and support. He was no softy. He could be firm and resolute and within his work exacted high standards.

In the last few years, while ill health and decreased mobility slowed his body, his mind continued to be sharp and clear. He was there with a patient ear and tentative advice, a natural practising theologian and prophet, whose love for God and God's creation provided the motivating principle for his ministry. He is and will be greatly missed.

Valedictory from MSE colleagues.

"Meet the world with the fullness of your being, and you shall meet God".

These words of Martin Buber sum up the life and the hope of the Revd. Michael Ranken who died at Hythe in Kent on May 11th, 2003.

Michael's keen intellect and extensive worldly experience were melded to give him a deep and sympathetic understanding of the human condition, particularly its longing for a relationship with God which did not require thinking to be suspended, or the facts of modern life ignored.

Michael passed through the Southwark Ordination Course in the 1970s, read widely, listened carefully, and travelled extensively as a Minister in Secular Employment (MSE). In his work as food technologist and businessman he was always reflecting, searching after truth, developing his spirituality and theology.

Michael recognised very early on the difficulties faced by people trying to live appropriately in their worlds of work. In 1982 his thoughts on *"A Theology for the Priest at Work"* appeared in the Journal *"Theology"*, generating a good deal of debate. Later in the 1980s he wrote :-

"I believe that there is a universal God (for want of any other word), accessible to all of us through our daily experience. I believe it is the task of Christian Ministers in Secular Employment to demonstrate that accessibility, to share it with our working colleagues and, whatever the difficulties,

to tell it back to our churches where so many seem to believe that the only valid experiences of God are those found in churches and endorsed by churchmen."

More of his theological thinking is to be found in his book *"How God Looks—if you don't start in Church"*, published in 2001 (Cairns Publications).

A man of firm yet adventurous faith Michael became sage and counsellor to many in the world of work. This came about through his great optimism, energy and application. Michael knew the loneliness felt by many of those Ordained to a Non-Stipendiary Ministry. In the early 1980s he began a "Newsletter among Ministers –at-Work, and others concerned" whose successor today is the Journal of Chrism. In 1984 Michael was the Secretary to the first national Conference of Ministers in Secular Employment at the University of Nottingham, Chaired by Bishop Kenneth Woolcombe. This event led to the formation of the Christians in Secular Employment Trust, and in 1992 to the foundation of its associated body Chrism (CHRistians in Secular Ministry) which is ecumenical and open to both lay and Ordained. The first Conference also brought a group of clergy with experience of MSE into consultation with the Chief Secretary of the then ACCM on draft regulations for NSM and MSE.

For good measure Michael encouraged everyone to share his discoveries and read as widely as possible, circulating a relevant bibliography to all contacts. He also developed and delighted in sharing experience with colleagues among the Pretres Ouvriers and the Mission de France, as well as the Presbyterian Association of Tentmakers and the Episcopal Self-Supporting Ministers in the USA. He still had enough energy to speak at local events and contribute to local church publications.

This account would be seriously incomplete without reference to Michael's sense of humour. Each of the early Newsletters had on its front page a cartoon (created by the late Rev. Harry Hill) showing someone wearing a clerical collar but carrying the tools of a trade, and about to do something unusual! That reminds us that in Michael Ranken the church has had the inspiration and dedicated service of an unusual and gifted Priest. We are truly thankful for his life and work. We trust that Martin Buber was entirely right and that Michael has found more fully the God who was always around where he was!

Keith Holt

Hon. Treasurer CHRISM, friend, and ministerial colleague.

Hugh Lee adds:

I was very sorry to hear of the death of Michael Ranken. My memory is that he was effectively the founder of CHRISM and did more than anybody else to encourage MSE, to give us confidence to continue it, to promote koinonia among MSEs, and to help to explain it to and to get it understood by the wider church. I am sure that CHRISM will continue to do all these things. Perhaps we could start an annual Michael Ranken memorial lecture/talk/essay on this?

The Editor comments:

CHRISM has been offered Michael's extensive library and plans are afoot to use this as a basis for an MSE library.