

Non-Stipendiary Ministry

– Lucky expedient and prophetic opportunity

The following article is a reflection on a morning's discussion between The Right Reverend Peter Selby, Bishop of Worcester, and a group of NSMs from the Lichfield Diocese, 4th October 2003, from the pen of K Ruth Stables.

Bishop Peter started by giving his credentials for talking about NSM ministry. He had been Vice-Principal of the Southwark Ordination Course (a well-known training ground for MSEs and NSMs!) and (in a manner of speaking) had then been an NSM himself when he was a Professorial Fellow at Durham University.

So, he started by asking us, given that one function of ministry was to *focus* aspects of the gospel and our response, which aspects of Christian life those priests who were in secular employment focussed? During the planning for one Diocesan Assembly where matters of real significance for the future of the Diocese were going to be discussed, he had questioned why it was being assumed that the Assembly should be at a weekend. He was told, as I am sure I would have said, that it was to take account of those who worked Monday to Friday and to ensure they did not feel excluded. But, said Bishop Peter, if it is that important, why not tell those who are working that he was prepared to write to their employer and explain what their firm/organisation will gain by letting "Bloggs" come to this Assembly. The letter would make the point that it will be an investment by you as an employer and a significant contribution to our human future. Attendance at such a meeting is also part of our "work" and should not necessarily encroach on our leisure/family time. Bishop Peter said he lost the argument but he never really expected the church to agree with him!

That challenging opening to the morning really made me think and certainly challenged some of my assumptions! Are we, asked Bishop Peter, as NSMs indulging in a "leisure activity" or a "hobby"? If what we do doesn't change the world, does it matter?

He then went on to talk about the dimension of privilege and the dimension of gift as part of being ordained. He claimed that, as Christians, we had not really tested the system and asked us if we were prepared to "walk tall" to the world? For example, we may grumble that the church takes us for granted and that we are undervalued but should we not also challenge a world and employers that take us, as NSMs, for granted? One NSM present said that we needed to test out the belief that "my boss wouldn't think of it" – we might be surprised! The church (i.e. us) should have the courage to approach the world/employers to do things.

Bishop Peter touched on the question of House for Duty posts and questioned whether they were really NSM posts. He also thought the term "self-supporting" ministers for NSMs was dodgy theologically!

He discussed boundary problems and all the difficulties that that poses with identifying who is included and who is not. He said that the Church he worked for is in a sense a "secular organisation", participating as it does in many of the realities of other employing bodies, so it must be right for the church to adopt the best practice of secular organisations, as well as challenging them with its own gospel values.

So he said we had to consider: -

- ~ our identity / our characteristics
- ~ our boundaries
- ~ the position of church in contemporary society.

In Worcester Diocese, he said they were working on the basis that the Church is there for those who were not/not yet its members (cf. William Temple) and that the "boundary area was one of our greatest challenges". We were here today because of a collapse of a boundary, that between priesthood and secular employment. Bishop Peter linked our position as NSMs and that of the whole mission of the church with this collapse of boundaries and reminded us that Christ was sent to search

for the lost sheep of the House of Israel, i.e. those outside the boundary. The danger was that the institution was always striving to re-invent boundaries that had broken down!

He saw a society and a world where the hard edges were collapsing and felt that institutions were on a hiding to nothing if they were always raising questions about themselves or were trying to reinvent themselves. This was a real tension and there was a whole narrative about the destruction of boundaries. This had been mirrored in Israel where there were kings and yet it was a place where God was the only king Remember (in the closing words of the Requiem) Lazarus "who once was a poor person". I interpreted what Bishop Peter was advocating as total inclusiveness.

He then claimed "this struggle is the fundamental problem of being church". The Gospel is true; it is not just a minor irritation. But the Gospel message deals with human issues. We are servants of a fleeting vision and we are going to have problems. Struggling with abrasions is of the essence.

Currently, we talk about the structures e.g. about "foundation hospitals" but not enough about health, and similarly about education and transport. And it is just the same in our church life. What we need to do is watch for the moment when the Gospel breaks through and this is usually from an unexpected quarter in a snatched moment from the person you maybe least expect e.g. an elderly frail person or a supposedly difficult individual. Bishop Peter stressed the importance of always asking questions from the edge but warned about becoming too defensive.

He was asked how we stopped getting shrill and he pointed to Jesus in the Gospels and advocated the use of humour. The important thing was not to take ourselves too seriously!

Bishop Peter spoke about the "multi-faith" issues in our prisons (he is the Bishop with special responsibility for prisons) and said that the boundary around faith issues in prisons and hospitals was critical and sensitive. In one prison, the "chapel" was not known as the "chapel" but as "the multi-faith". (And, did we know, he said, that we lock up more Muslims than ever before?) There was no escape from issues of boundary and identity. We were in the world and could not be out of it. We had to learn to live with the tensions.

Bishop Peter said that our confusion was the confusion by which God had chosen to save the world.

In discussion, the concept of "naming" as gift was introduced, with "naming" seen as redeeming and not as labelling. Also, this linked with the importance of losing things and thereby living with loss and this in turn being the start of renewal and naming.

Bishop Peter was adamant that the institution could not control mission and there was always therefore risk! Similarly perhaps, the "church" felt it could not control NSMs in the same way and therefore there was more risk!

He closed with the saying of David Jenkins: "even the church can't keep a good God down".

This was a truly stimulating talk. If any of you have any comments do let me have them. The overall message seemed to me to be that we should have courage and confidence in our role as NSMs and rejoice in our ministry, which is sometimes on the edge, but the no less valuable for that and a place from which we can challenge from the inside.