

Whither CHRISM? Some further reflections

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Back in November 2001, at Sutton Courtenay, those of us present looked again at the role of CHRISM (not again do I hear some of you say!). Some of us were even asked to go away and do some more reflecting!

For some time a small group of people interested in ministry in the workplace (in its widest sense) had been meeting together in a pub in Lichfield called The Hedgehog. We were: a very recently retired MSE, a very busy working MSE, two very committed lay people undertaking ministry in the workplace, an OLM, a lay Roman Catholic, a Reader and a soon to be retired MSE. Not all of the above came to the meetings but all have seen at least the penultimate draft of this paper. We called ourselves "The Hedgehog Group" (asking prickly questions at the edge of church!)

So - what did we talk about? – and where did we get to? Well we certainly didn't find all the answers but I hope this paper stimulates more discussion – what do *YOU* think?

Should CHRISM be for ordained or lay people?

Very firmly and clearly we felt it should be for both. CHRISM must develop this strength.

However, we were sad that lay people sense it is mainly for those who are ordained – but all is not doom and gloom! One lay person said: "It's quite cheering. I feel more supported when I meet you lot than back in the parish. It's a level playing field in this Group – we have a common aim, the same vision, there's no split."

Inevitably in our discussions, we strayed from thinking simply about CHRISM and reflected about wider ministerial issues. For example, the most difficult question posed to MSEs constantly is: "why do you have to be ordained?" And from one lay person seeking ordination came the comment "the answer that God has called you doesn't count if you want to be an MSE."

How do MSEs link with OLMs (Ordained Local Ministers)?

Perhaps the important question here is how the person in the workplace sees MSEs and OLMs. I suspect the differences really don't matter out there at the sharp end so why do they matter to us? Do we try to make too much of the distinctions and if so why? Yes, I know, in church terms, MSEs are work-based NSMs and can minister throughout the church and OLMs can only minister within their own parish with its mandated team to support them. But I guess that doesn't mean too much to people on the shop-floor to whom church may be a strange place anyway!

I sense that the more meaningful distinction may be between ministers who see themselves as parish-based and those who see themselves as work-based. It's the context of ministry that counts. But we should not forget that even those who see themselves as work-based also have roots in a parish and those who see themselves as mainly parish-based frequently meet and have contacts with those who work! As one person said: "in an ideal world, we would not wrestle with all these distinctions – the context would define our ministry."

Perhaps though MSEs work more at the edge, more in the neighbourhood, more in the workplace, and not so ostensibly in church.

And what about Readers?

Many Readers have a real ministry at work and are often seen as very accessible – perhaps akin to lay preachers in the Methodist church. People talk about "lay preachers" in work conversations, but not about MSEs. Why not?

Ministry and mission in the workplace

Isn't it a great privilege and opportunity to have an unpaid ministry, which is recognised somehow (MSE, OLM, Reader) and is outside in the world of work as well as held within the structures in the church?

Does this make such ministers a potential threat to those whose salaries are paid by the church and have to wrestle with buildings, and the necessities of church administration?

Perhaps members of CHRISM have a kind of freedom that is less available to our paid colleagues. I shall certainly never forget one stipendiary clergyperson saying to me after 24 hours at one of our CHRISM weekends: "I've never been to a weekend like this before. It's wonderful. You are all so free." Those of us undertaking ministry in the workplace can both "be" and "do" from within the structures of society. As one person said: "you cannot have one without the other. The response to "being" is in the "doing". It is the context of our "doing" that distinguishes ministers in the workplace.

Although people from outside the church and at work always want to know if MSEs are "proper Vicars", the defining difference for an MSE seems to be that you are "one of them." You are not from "outside" like a parish clergyperson or an Industrial Missioner.

Are there 3 overlapping circles? – what is the minister's own perception of his/her ministry? Is what is written below helpful or not?

- ~ parish-based clergy whose role is primarily pastoral;
- ~ MSEs (and OLMs and Readers too) whose role is pastoral but is also alongside in the workplace and often working deeply within the structures;
- ~ Industrial Missioners whose role is in the workplace and who are usually paid by the church to be there and whose role is also to comment and reflect on the wider social and economic dimensions of work and to work and campaign in the structures of society.

The boundaries are fuzzy – and perhaps they always will be. The differences cannot, and should not, be too closely defined.

The role of MSEs in the workplace

By virtue of their priesthood, MSEs have a representative role. They are ministers of Word and Sacrament. They are recognised and authorised as ministers of the wider church. The Church is visible in that place through them.

There is a servant leadership from within the structures where they work and they have the freedom to "preach the Gospel" appropriately from that place.

Those with whom they work will put expectations of what it means to be a "Vicar" upon them and they work alongside their colleagues to fulfil the objectives of their employer. How they do their job will be a large part of their Christian witness.

MSEs are likely to be good communicators and passionate and prophetic.

MSEs will be in the privileged position of working alongside people of other faiths and none.

MSEs, by their very presence in the workplace, can act as a source of encouragement and support to other Christians in the place of work.

- and the role of OLMs and Readers in the workplace?

Much of the above applies to OLMs and Readers too. OLMs are ministers of Word and Sacrament only in their parish and Readers are ministers primarily of the Word.

Do stipendiary clergy see OLMs who have secular jobs as ministers in the workplace? – and do OLMs want to be seen in that way? Our experience suggests that many don't.

Apart from that, where are the dividing lines and, as I said earlier, does it matter to the person at work?

What do we really mean by "the priesthood of all believers"?

Should the next question be: what is the nature of priesthood in secular work? Isn't it more important to use the title "priest" and not worry further about more defining and restricting titles, which only get in the way?

Why do MSEs (Workplace Ministers) need CHRISM?

The secular world, particularly the public sector, works very much as a team. It can be very isolating in the church to be a Workplace Minister. I shall always be grateful for the support and challenges I received through my involvement with CHRISM.

MSEs (in the widest sense of the words) have very different jobs in a range of contexts. There is richness in sharing.

Should MSEs be Workplace Chaplains?

We made comparisons with the work of a Hospital/Prison Chaplain i.e. a person also employed by the organisation. A Workplace Chaplain need not be ordained (some Hospital Chaplains are lay people).

The context would be comparable but an MSE is employed to do their job, which is secular in nature e.g. teaching English. They are not employed primarily as ministers of the Gospel, but you cannot stop being a priest – we are not "part-time" priests.

The issue may be that people expect the "chaplain" to fulfil certain functions. MSEs, by and large, do not fulfil defined priestly "functions" as such at work e.g. giving Communion to the sick, taking a service – being pastoral and ministering to the structures is much less easy to define. Words don't help! MSEs are paid for the job they do for their secular employer. Our priesthood runs through us like lettering through a stick of rock and contributes to the overall wholeness of whatever is our context.

To sum up ...

I see two main contexts, which overlap:

Parish focus

Stipendiary clergy
NSM
OLM
Reader

Work focus

MSE
OLM
Reader

CHRISM needs to raise the awareness of OLM, Reader and MSE ministry in the workplace. The OLM mandate should include the place of work *if* the OLM wants a particular emphasis on their ministry in their place of work. Likewise, Readers could be encouraged to view their prime place of ministry as their workplace.

Overall, the important task for CHRISM is to concentrate on supporting ministry in the workplace (whatever it is called) and looking at what unites rather than divides in building the Kingdom. I believe that is what CHRISM is there for.

Should CHRISM now look at what it means to be in ministry and the context in which that ministry is undertaken?

What do you think?

*K. Ruth Stables,
on behalf of The Hedgehog Group
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