



CHRISM 15

CHRISM

***A Local Priesthood in
Rural Ministry
Jim Cummins***

CHRistians In Secular Ministry



Foreword

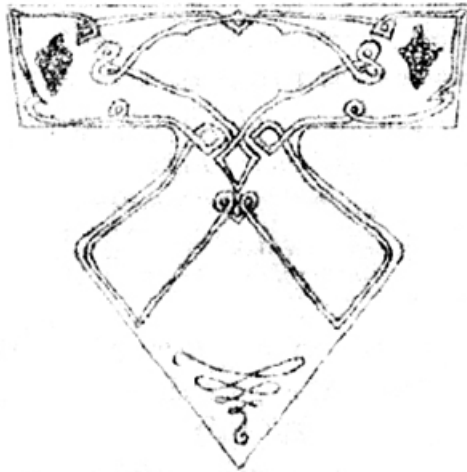
The paper reproduced here was written in 1974 by Jim Cummins, then a Vicar in the Raveningham group, Diocese of Norwich, on behalf of the ministry team. It describes an early exploration of what was later called Local Ordained Ministry, identifying why it was needed and proposing how to put it into practice. Many obstacles he identified are, regrettably, all too familiar today — over-academic training for ordinands, reluctance to explore new patterns of ministry and inflexible church organisation. Yet Jim's vision and message is one of hope — with God's blessing, a ministry rooted in and called from local communities, living place or workplace, is possible.

Ordained deacon in 1960, priest in 1961, after a curacy in Stafford Jim spent 11 years in rural parochial ministry. He observed how local leadership could be nurtured in the churches he served, and, inspired by the example of European and British worker priests, appreciated the importance of integrating working life and faith. A spell working as an agricultural labourer in Norfolk added to his understanding.

In 1976, Jim left stipendiary ministry and lived in a small cottage next to the family farm at Skyborry, nestled under Offa's Dyke near Knighton, while working as under-storeman at a local agricultural business. The Bishop of Hereford saw Jim as a bonus, and he covered interregna in local churches and over the border in Wales. When the agricultural firm made all its staff redundant, Jim and another mechanic started their own firm, Clunside Sales and Services. When he also took over running the family farm Jim was very busy!

Over the coming years his guidance to many (including myself) exploring ministry in secular employment was always insightful, and endlessly generous. CHRISM events were lifted when Jim was present, and those of us who visited Skyborry and enjoyed the wonderful hospitality he and Esther, his beloved wife, supporter, and rock, shared were blessed indeed.

A LOCAL PRIESTHOOD IN RURAL MINISTRY



AN AREA OF EXPERIMENT
described by
the Revd. JAMES CUMMINS

A Local Priesthood in Rural Ministry

An Area of Experiment?

Described by the Revd. James Cummins

Aim

This paper has been prepared with the purpose of examining in practical terms the present situation of the Church where ministry, and in particular priestly ministry, is concerned, to see what the future is likely to hold in store, and what action might be taken to prepare for that future.

Scope

The paper will look at one very small area, but it is suggested that the lessons from this area may not be without wider relevance.

Description of area

The Raveningham Group of Parishes, which is in a team ministry, consists of eleven rural parishes. The parish boundaries, though they may once have been of some relevance, represent no more than a cartographic doodle. They bear little or no relation to where people live.

The boundary of the Group, however, is marked by a natural barrier of water, the rivers Waveney, Yare and Chat encircling a very large part of the area, which is severed on its remaining, western, flank by a main road (the A146, Loddon — Gillingham section). The total population of the area numbers about 4,000 and is increasing slowly. Most of the working population is still employed locally, on the land or in small industries (building, apple picking and storage plant, hospital, etc.). The remainder commute to nearby towns, where the scope and variety of work is considerable — Norwich, Beccles, Bungay, Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft are all within easy reach. There is a slow but steady drift away from the local employment towards the more lucrative jobs in the towns.

The Church

Of these 4,000 people, probably no more than 200 could be counted 'fairly regular' worshippers in the Anglican churches and the situation is much the same in the other branches. There are no ministers of other Christian traditions resident

in the Group. The Roman Catholic priest lives in Beccles and is friendly and cooperative within the permitted limits of his Order. The Methodist church is mostly within the Loddon and Bungay Circuit. A close working relationship has been established with the superintendent minister, who comes fairly frequently to pray, plan and study with our clergy team. Some of his congregations also work closely, with joint worship, meetings etc. and shared buildings.

In 1964 there were 18 places of worship in the Group area. Now, one church has been declared redundant, a 'mission' hut has been let to the Scouts and three of the six chapels are no longer in use.

Clergy staffing

Over the past 25 years or so, while the population has been slowly increasing, the numbers of clergy employed has been decreasing.

In 1944 there were six clergy in the area of the Group; in 1954, five; in 1964, four. It is from the beginning of 1964 that the Group has been developing, starting with six parishes and taking over others as they have fallen vacant.

Since 1967, when the last of the eleven parishes was incorporated, the area has been staffed by three clergy working full-time within the area and a fourth who has shared in the overall planning and strategy but who, though living within the Group, has had no local pastoral responsibility; he has been employed as a full time Youth Chaplain within the Diocese.

Projection

Ever since the "Paul Report" of 1964 (or his "Church by Daylight", 1973), there has been the prospect of further drastic cuts in the numbers of clergy who are likely to be available for ministry in this sort of area. It would appear that this forecast is based on two grounds:

1. The shortage of clergy (a threat — or a promise — that is not yet apparent)
2. A shortage of funds from which the clergy are to be paid.

To these grounds should be added the contention of Leslie Paul in his 1964 report, that if more men and more funds were available, they should be directed to the vast areas of high-density population rather than to such rural areas as this.

The need

If what is written so far is true, there are various courses of action open to us:

- (1) We can sit back and grumble or do nothing (or perhaps content ourselves that it is all part of God's plan and so leave it to Him!)
- (2) We can argue against Paul's suggestion and try to perpetuate the old pattern, fighting a strong rear-guard action.
- (3) We can seek alternative forms of ministry to fill the gap.

There is a widely accepted country premise which suggests that the more thinly fertilisers are spread on the ground the less you can expect to harvest. To apply this to clergy staffing is not inappropriate. To suggest that such a law of diminishing returns is inevitable is to counsel despair. But when the farmer can no longer afford or obtain the artificial fertiliser on which he has come to depend, he may once again come to value and use the products of his own farmyard.

The work of ministry within the Group. At this point it is necessary to look briefly at the way in which the ministry of the Church within the Group has been developing. For it will become clear that any attempt to answer the need for alternative forms of ministry along the lines we are proposing must depend on the growth of the whole Church to accept and offer such alternatives.

The first aim of the Team ministry was to build up a sense of "community" within the Group as a whole; to find where the natural areas of community lay and to foster their growth. Such effort meant challenging many traditional values and assumptions which had been held inviolate for decades, perhaps centuries — witness that most basic cow, the parish boundary.

Secondly, it has been the aim of the Group to build up and encourage the local, indigenous, church within these community areas. Traditionally the parson has been the king of his own patch — or as it has been expressed so aptly, "Cock on his own dunghill."

But, unlike barnyard cocks, the parson has been a bird of passage. Whatever ideas he has had, however helpful he has been, however successful in building up the church during his reign, his efforts have largely evaporated with his departure. This is a gross over-simplification. Good work has been done which has lasted; examples can be found where one incumbent has been able to build on another's

foundations. But nonetheless, the lack of continuity and the pattern of ministry which encourages each successive incumbent to rule with little or no regard for the people he is called to serve prohibits mature growth.

Within the Group this constantly starting from scratch practically cannot be. If the clergy work as a team, the priesthood is not that of individuals but of the team. Personalities do not have to be denied — on the contrary, they are enhanced for each individual within the team can benefit and grow from his team experiences. What is done is that in addition to the individual personalities and gifts of the team members, there grows up a corporate "Team" personality. (This may not be the experience of all teams of clergy, but it has been the experience of the Ravingingham Group and derives undoubtedly in large measure from the regular and frequent meeting together of the members for worship and prayers, as well as study and planning).

When a change of staff happens in the Group it cannot be denied that a setback is to be expected. But the ministry still goes on — the familiar, team ministry — and when a replacement arrives growth can continue from roughly the point where the last man left off.

Within this setting the ministry of the Word, sacrament and pastoral care in the Group has been growing. Nor has ministry remained the exclusive task of the clergy. Part of the growth has been the acceptance of increased responsibility by individual churches and by individual Christians. Again, this is not to suggest that such growth has not happened elsewhere. It is only stating what our own experience has been, and there can be little doubt that our growth has been helped by the strength of the team of clergy to resist, more easily than an individual person could, the pressures for the clergyman to BE the church and to DO it all himself. There is, incidentally, still staunch resistance by churches and individuals to the pressures that the Group applies to them = we are not relating a story of great success or a panacea for the future Church. We have been privileged to witness a slight and gradual waking among some of our friends and supporters within the local churches of a need, a willingness, even a demand to be allowed to share our ministry. And if the ministry is to be shared, why not the Priesthood? If there is to be a shortage of priests, why not ordain some more?

What is a priest?

The role of the priest, or country parson, involved in 'parish work' or pastoral ministry has changed very radically in the past twenty years, and more if we look back to, say, the beginning of the present century. Then, while he may often have acted as unofficial poor-relief officer to the needy and exercised a beneficent oversight in the multifarious parish activities, he was free to be a teaching, studying, visiting, worshipping priest. By the end of the Second World War, the parish priest, himself often in reduced circumstances, was everybody's dogsbody. It was commonplace by the mid-fifties for the parson to dissipate all his energies acting as his own sacristan, sexton and clerk, sweeping and cleaning, raising huge sums of money for repairs, and running everything, whether it was wanted or not, in his village, or, more and more often, his villages.

At the same time the villages themselves have been changing to the point where it is difficult to distinguish between what is town and what is country. Money, mobility, and the ever-present reality of that hybrid of urban mentality and rural surroundings, the commuter, has had an unsettling effect. Disheartened priests have flitted with increasing frequency from place to place, shedding one oppressive burden only to take up another, or occasionally opting out altogether.

Now the pendulum is swinging the other way. The laity (or, as we might prefer it, 'The Church') is opening its eyes and accepting its share of responsibility—at least where it is allowed to. How many priests cling tenaciously to burdens that they are ill-fitted to bear for fear of being left in a vacuum? Where responsibility is being shared, the previously 'busy' parson is able to shake himself free and ask again, what is a priest? What is his role in the church today? Our answer is that the priest in the local church is the leader of that church, and his leadership is expressed when he presides at the celebration of the sacraments. Indeed, the only functions that belong exclusively to the priest are those of leadership in the sacraments.

But such leadership is only possible insofar as the priest is accepted by the local community as leader. One can think of bad priests, drunken priests and so on, whose ministry is only kept going by the sanctity of their few indomitable supporters but the priest in isolation ceases to exercise any priestly function.

Speaking generally, the priest is only priest insofar as he is leader, and he is only leader insofar as he is exercising areal and effective pastoral ministry.

There is nothing here about "The Word", nothing about preaching as such. The omission has been deliberate for two reasons. While the need for an understanding of Bible and Theology is recognised and valued (possibly more needful now than ever before), it must be acknowledged that such understanding is not the exclusive prerogative of the clergy. Nor should the "Word" be limited to theology or biblical knowledge, still less to doctrine Church History etc. The Word is expressed principally in pastoral care and sacramental worship. Indeed, as soon as we can get away from the academic charade, at present obligatory for all candidates for the ordained ministry, the better.

A local priesthood

In the past, in times of interregnum, every parish has thrown up its own natural leader. Nor would it be difficult to see who would be thrown up in this way in an interregnum was to occur today. Amongst these natural leaders there are some who are respected by both Church and local community, who are already exercising a valuable pastoral ministry and who might be willing to be considered for the priesthood. In our own Group four such have been approached and all shown interest. Unfortunately, one of these has since died as a result of a tractor accident. The remaining three, an engineer, a farmer and a nurse, have been working with the existing clergy team for some months to try and establish whether they are called to the priesthood and what such ordination might involve.

They have expressed fears of their ignorance, fears of extra work that might be involved (and it must be stressed that such candidates will inevitably be extremely busy people, caught up in various ways in community development), and fears of the mysterious gulf that appears to yawn between priest and people. The clergy have tended to minimise the differences, to reassure the candidates and to encourage them to recognise the very real and vital ministry that they are already exercising. It is stressed that they (will (would) be required to celebrate the sacraments (which they already attend) and that it would be necessary for them to meet regularly with their professional colleagues as a team. Two out of the three have taken to coming at least once a week to the daily office, Mass and

meditation that is celebrated by the Group. At the time of writing, they are working with the professional clergy, looking at the Eucharist from different standpoints.

In discussion with some other priests the argument has been put forward that we are going to produce more "Mass Priests". The pastoral care shown by the candidates and their standing in the community is the evident denial of this. If anything, the boot is on the other foot. The present trend in the Church — to spread the muck more thinly and to give to each priest more and more parishes to care for, covering bigger and bigger areas — is increasingly turning the professionals into Mass Priests.

The local volunteers are far more involved with the lives of the community and those within it - they belong to it and are constantly on the spot while their professional colleagues are left, apart, remote and bogged down with administrative duties which fill their every hour.

It seems clear that certain conditions must belong to this rather specialised and highly localised ministry.

1. It is only possible to start thinking about such a localised priesthood where the local Church has been brought up to accept it. In our own area, such efforts as are being made have happened only after ten years of hard labour aimed at relaxing the Church and freeing it from the fetters of its established formalities.
2. Preparation for such a ministry may not take the candidates away and change them. It is not so much the candidates who need to be trained as the whole Church — and that must be done on the home ground.
3. Such a ministry (perhaps all ministry) will only be possible where the local priests are working within a closely knit team which must include one or more professionals. These professionals will need to be more professional than in the past, keeping up to date in theology, and developments within the Church and World, praying conscientiously for and with their fellows and offering themselves as "shock-absorbers" for the volunteers. The volunteers are much more closely in touch with the humdrum daily life of society and are likely to suffer for it — they will be less cushioned than

their professional brethren and it is to be hoped that they remain so. What better argument in favour of a local priesthood?

4. Such a ministry is essentially local and limited. The volunteer priest belongs to the community that has appointed him. This calls into question the indelibility of his orders. What happens if he should move to another area? The present suggestion is that the volunteer priest should be given a limited licence. There can be no question of his orders being any different to any others. A priest is a priest but whereas the professional takes it for granted that he will be licensed wherever he chooses to go (goodness knows why) the volunteer should take it for granted that he will not; at least until he has earned his place in his new community.

On the strength of the arguments outlined here we are continuing our dialogue with our 'ordinands' and extending the work of preparing the Group to use them. What we need now is the sanction of the Church at large, and our Bishops in particular, to allow the new growth to bear fruit. We hope that it may be made possible if only by labelling our Group an "Area of Experiment" for a period of, say, not less than ten years from now.

July 1974

JAMES CUMMINS
Heckingham Vicarage
Norwich



Jim's last sermon!

**CHRISM is the
National Association of
CHRistians In Secular Ministry**

for **all** Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision.

To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly Journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat.

Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment.

Further information may be obtained from the website:

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*To help ourselves and others to celebrate
the presence of God
and the holiness of life in our work,
and to see and tell the Christian story there.*

Further copies of this paper are available from:

Rob Fox
51 St. Ronan's Drive, Seaton Sluice, Whitley Bay,
Northumberland, NE26 4JW.
Email: rob.fox36@gmail.com

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