

Self-Supporting Ministry

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These notes formed the basis of a talk about self-supporting ministry at the joint deanery chapters meeting in the Charing Cross Archdeaconry on 13 May 2013

I welcome the opportunity to discuss self-supporting ministry today or what I prefer to call unpaid ministry which is clearer. None of us are self-supporting – we are all supported by other people and, of course, God. What I say is from my personal experience. Everyone's story is different and, unlike traditional ministries, there is no blue print. Some aspects of what I say strike a chord and some will not.

Work Life

I need to give an account of my background so you see where I am coming from. I worked as a lawyer for 35 years, specialising in planning and environmental law. As a solicitor, I was involved in long hours culture, often arriving at 9 a.m. and leaving at 11 p.m.

Two years ago, I retired from law and am now a student at Heythrop College, studying inter-religious relations. It is a part time course but feels like full time. In some respects, I am furthering my theological education – education is never completed.

I was ordained seven years ago and since then my ministry has been at St Paul's Church, Rossmore Road. So for five years, I worked as a busy solicitor and also as unpaid curate. Looking back it was a juggle. My abiding memory is getting the train back late at night after a day's work and reading evening prayer in the tube, making the best of the time. But I did see my life as a unity.

I have often been asked by paid clergy: did I ever wear a dog collar at work? Answer: an emphatic no. My job was not a chaplain. I didn't wear my religion on my sleeve. I didn't stand around the coffee dispenser with an inane smile and ask people if they were saved. I had a demanding job to do. People knew I was a priest – if only because my alb sometimes was hung up behind my door when I was to officiate that evening. I did not have queues of people telling me their problems. Others may have different experiences and that may relate to what roles they are performing at work.

What did I do which may have been priestly? You may think not very much. I would keep an eye on people working too hard and have a quiet word with them. I would warn employers if I felt people were working too hard and too stressed. I helped some support staff understand court cases, particularly custody and immigration disputes. I had to explain to people about issues arising in the national press about the Church of England, e.g. gay bishops.

In professional life, I saw myself as a facilitator – getting people to agree who were reluctant to agree without a fight or court case; that may be part of our ministry of reconciliation. Indeed, I have qualified but not practised as a mediator.

I used to justify often working for the haves rather than the have-nots – by saying that environmental lawyers act in a way like environmental policemen. That we exist means big business is less likely to cut corners. You may think a weak justification for not being able to pass through the eye of the needle.

Parish Life

Brian Masters famously said – the trouble with NSMs – note the politically incorrect usage – is that they are always working and can't take services when we need them! It is no good if you are an incumbent about to receive an unpaid curate to think that's another pair of hands to balance the work load. If you have that view, you will be sorely disappointed.

Quite clearly, I could not act – or try to act - as a mini paid curate. Any feeling that I might have played that role was dispelled when I invited my incumbent to my place of work. He noted the intense, pressurised atmosphere in the work place. Any incumbent who has not seen her unpaid clergy at work should ask for an invitation to visit them there.

My role in St Paul's has been to be part of a team, seeing things perhaps a bit more dispassionately from slightly afar. It is to warn and advise when something not working and how to deal with issue. It involves supporting one another and being supported. I liken it to a junior barrister being led in a big legal case: the QC has most of the responsibility but is supported by having someone she can trust to bounce ideas off.

I am fortunate to work with a close-knit team, the volunteers consisting of a Church Army sister, a deacon and a reader. All of us have different but complimentary skills. There is a lot of teasing and fun but also support when needed. Real friendships have been formed in our team; our incumbent and I have been known to drink the odd beer or two at the top of Q Stand in Lord's Cricket Ground. We work collegially. Issues are talked through to reach a consensus.

In addition to Sunday, my ministry has been centred around the Eucharist on Friday mornings, hospital visits but very few home visits.

In my sermons, I have reflected on work dynamics, environmental and justice issues. I once even quoted in a sermon a dissenting Supreme Court judgement from Lady Hale.

What are we seeking from incumbents?

I am sceptical about the value of written agreements but I can see that they may help some draw a boundary about what clergy can and can't do.

For those who have clergy in your team, this is what I would expect:

- weekly staff meetings, ours at 8 a.m. on Monday morning;
- six weekly catch up sessions;
- sharing confidences about strategic matters, being in on the loop on all important issues;
- talking through differences to come up with a common position which all can buy into;
- discussing staff appointments and being invited on interview panels.

I would have thought this was pre-requisite where there are paid or unpaid clergy on in your staff team. If it is not your practice, you may wish to ask why.

Model of Ministry

In a recent Church Times, Colin Podmore said he saw priesthood as representing Christ at the altar and because Christ was male so should be the priest. In the partings of the ways between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, we can note how the Jews did not reinvent a separate priesthood

after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple but Christians eventually did. Where I differ from Podmore is that we do not have a priesthood distinct from the priesthood of all believers. We stand at the altar as a representative of that priesthood of all believers, representing the body of Christ, male and female. Being not distinct or separate matches our roles in secular employment. We are very much mixed in with people in a non-hierarchical way. Places of work today have dress down cultures and use of first names from top to bottom while our churches seem obsessed by clinging on to worn out formalities from a past era. Our priesthood means nothing hierarchical at work and nor should it in church. It should not be a badge of separation or privilege. Priesthood for me is about removing barriers and opening up dialogue.

We read Paul's letters most days of the year – what he was concerned about was that there should be no artificial barriers to joining the people of God, why he was adamant that Gentiles should not have to observe Jewish rites. I was shocked when joining the deanery as a clergyperson finding how split it is between various churchpersonships. Coming from a large city firm, we all had to buy into house style and the firm's way of doing things. We had no option but to present a united front to our clients and the outside world. Coming from North Thames Ministerial Training College, we all had to buy into a culture of respect for the other. Even if we had profound disagreements, we had to work together. As a result, many of those who have been trained in evening training colleges have a profound unease about the almost apartheid divisions in the central area of this diocese.

I have started in a small way to try to make bridges but I have hit some brick walls in seeking to remove barriers. Our priesthood should be removing barriers and brick walls - my interest in mediation and inter-faith relations hopefully reflects that concern.

Challenge to Culture

We are getting to the stage where about half those being ordained will be unpaid. With half those ordained now women, that means the model of priesthood is changing. That has implications not only on women priests and unpaid priests, but on ministry generally – particularly how we relate to each other.

The CofE has at last woken up to its treatment of women has been largely token. There seems now to be some effort to start tackling this but there is a long way to go. I get the feeling that some recognition is now at last being given to unpaid clergy - there is still a long way to go such as in scheduling meetings outside standard work hours but may be this evening is a welcome start. If one looks at anti-discrimination laws, there is the outlawing of blatant discrimination. But there are subtler forms of discrimination – indirect discrimination - which are equally discriminatory and in secular employment outlawed. I put it out for discussion whether our times of meetings, styles of address such as 'Father' and general subculture of clergy are discriminatory against women and unpaid clergy. Is there a willingness to change to reflect the diversity of ministry which we now have in the CofE? What changes do you think you need to make to reflect the diversities of ministries?

What we can offer?

I welcome this meeting because we can have a dialogue how best our talents can be used. I have really enjoyed being at St Paul's and I feel very fulfilled there. I have also enjoyed being asked to do things in other churches but for the most part only as cover on a Sunday or weekday when needed. I would like to see us being used effectively as a deanery or inter-deanery resource as well as a parish resource.

I once heard a criticism of us on the basis that we weren't properly theologically educated.

Although we may have not spent so much as paid clergy in being theologically educated, , we bring to the table something different:

- reflection on work;
- experience of having to earn a living in the market place;
- secular expertise whether it be teaching, managing, running a business or in my case being involved in environment and town planning concerns.

Can I ask whether your churches regularly reflect on these issues? They are all of vital importance to our congregations. If such topics are not covered in your sermons, what does that say about your church's incarnational teaching? If you are engaged theologically in such reflections, we may be able to assist in furthering such reflection by providing:

- a slot in a course of sermons;
- a meditation for a lent group;
- a reflection on a parish away day; or
- even a telephone call – I'm preaching on this topic – have you any ideas?

That might be the start of some exchange in our ministries – making the best of our resources in our deaneries and archdeaconries whether that resource be paid or unpaid, catholic or evangelical, man or woman. After all, we are all one in Christ.

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