

CHRISM Paper 5

MSEs and Retirement

Introduction

At the outset it is important to recognise that the expression "MSE" embraces all who try to live out their faith in their working lives, as well as in the rest of their living! It therefore includes all baptised Christians, among them lay ministers such as lay preachers, readers, and ordained or commissioned deacons, priests, presbyters and others.

It is a fact of life, and a tribute to the history of MSE, that a number are now approaching retirement from earning their living in the way to which they were accustomed. Others have already been through the retirement process.

At the annual conference at Oxford in September 2000 there was a session on MSE and retirement. This took the form of some introductory comments followed by group discussion. The experience then shared is recorded here to provide a resource for other MSEs thinking about retirement, and those who support them. It may also be of value to a wider audience.

The word "retirement" has many different tones in our society and for many it has been seen as much as a threat as an opportunity. Whether or not we like the word the experience is an important step on the journey of life, and for some the step may have to be taken more than once!

From a Christian perspective life is a continuing, and holy, process in which death itself is a stage into new life. So also, retirement marks the beginning of new way of life.

Preliminary questions.

It is helpful to begin with some background questions and thoughts :-

- Must we always put "doing" before "being"?
- Is it too simple to say that MSEs become "Ministers in secular retirement"?
- Moving out of paid work is not the same as ceasing to work. Hopefully most of those who retire remain socially, mentally and physically active and creative.
- What was the relationship with the parish (or equivalent structure) before leaving paid work? Many MSE s played some part there, in administration, liturgy, and in occasional offices.
- On leaving paid work some may regroup their energies around some other aspect of Christian ministry in and through paid work. Others may become more church-related and spend time as assistant clergy, lay chaplains etc.
- What about the psychological dimension? How do we handle the expectations, not least our own expectations of ourselves? Those who are ordained, or hold specific offices, have public

responsibilities laid upon them and may feel rather more aware of a need to justify their position after retirement.

- Should retired MSEs seek to find publicly distinctive ministries? Often their Christian ministry prior to retirement was largely hidden. Is that likely to change after retirement?
- Does a search for distinctiveness at this time arise from a renewed need for identity, recognition, and affirmation? Some of this was probably met previously by the role at work.
- Does retirement bring an enhanced sense of a gulf between liturgy and ecclesiastical concerns on one hand, and the more pressing, broader and interconnected issues, of the world beyond the churches?
- Does retirement bring new opportunities for reading, study and prayer? Do we take them?
- There is often a mismatch between the dates and ages at which secular retirement happens and what happens in the parochial or similar system. How is that handled – when does the MSE formally retire from the local church? When do Christians, clergy or not, "retire" from their roles in the ecclesiastical structures
- Those who are not ordained, and their ordained colleagues at work, only seem to gain recognition from the church when, and if, they offer more time to help with traditional parish things. For both these groups their experience of being Christians in the world of work is often ignored. After retirement is there scope to bring more of an MSE perspective to the Parish?
- Clearly the circumstances of MSEs in retirement vary enormously. Some have found financing their households difficult throughout their lives. Do we, and they, have an opportunity to both support one another, and work for justice in the provision our society makes for retirement? Or for wider issues of justice in society?

Thinking about retirement.

We need to decide what to do, and what not to do about such things as:

- **Priorities:** For instance, our personal order of priorities may have been God, family, work, church and self. Circumstances, such as health or finance, may drive a re-appraisal. For many "self" might need to come more to the fore!
- **Responsibilities:** How are we to share domestic essentials with our partner/spouse if we have one? What about the sharing of space and time to allow all in the household to flourish? Have we tidied off our business/official interests to avoid future difficulties for others? We must face up to the new situation that is summed up in the word "retirement", not least to its effect on other people.
- **Values:** Where does our sense of belonging, affirmation, self-esteem, and value come from? Are they work/position dependent? How will that change, and how can we handle it? What can we do to prepare for withdrawal from one world, that of paid work, and entry to another?
- **Power:** Whether we held power at work through the position we occupied, through rank, or simply "felt" power because we used to belong to an organisation which influenced the wider world, that will change on retirement. Are we likely to want to continue to seek power? Will we recognise the risks for us in that tendency?

- Opportunities: Depending on our personal/domestic circumstances the world may become our "oyster". What is God calling us to do next; what do we feel we have energy for? Have we gifts that have been dormant, or never explored?
- Ethics: What are the ethical undertones to our personal debate, which we may share with others? Choices are never unlimited, but they are always important.
- Transition: Do we plan a gradual change from full-time work, which may have been very stressful, demanding, but rewarding? How can this be arranged e.g. through part-time working; a different appointment/role; a term appointment; job-sharing?
- Ministry: Many Christians become uneasy if they cannot define, and describe, their contribution to the Church as well as to God's world. Clearly, as our context changes our form of "ministry" must also change. It does not have to be church-oriented. Our new ministry may have many strands, mental, social and physical. For instance the mental might include writing, formal academic study, special interest groups or classes, and reading.
- Feelings: All sorts of feelings can arise at this time. Guilt can be experienced, and sometimes a fear of drifting. These may be part of the legacy of the work ethic of our society. Other feelings which may be around can include disorientation. Do not be afraid of such feelings but check that they are not driving your decisions. There can also be grieving in the "bereavement" although this will be more evident for some than for others. We may not have realised how dependent we had become upon our previous role or position.

How to maintain an MSE perspective.

As has already been said the changes associated with retirement must be squarely faced, and they are largely unavoidable. In another sense MSEs believe that they have a unique perspective on life which should continue, albeit in a different context. There follows a note of things to consider, both as retirement approaches, and when it arrives, to try to keep fresh our way of seeing.

- Create your own agenda. Do not allow stipendiary clergy to assume that you are now available to do more in the Parish. The nature of our church involvement is one of the choices.
- Remember that most human "work" is unpaid! If human beings are to become "whole" they need to be "employed", in the sense of being active and engaged with life around them. An MSE perspective in retirement has integrity. For most people retirement does not mean inactivity!
- Develop links; belong to networks connected with your interests. Continue to read and reflect both on what you read, and upon the wider scene of life.
- Do not take on new things immediately. Pause for at least 6 months to get the feel of what may be right for you now. Reflect on what happens and hopefully you will find the right balance for you.
- Our MSE thinking, whether on time management or theology, can be carried forward very positively into our new contexts.
- We can have the same conviction in our new context that we put into the earlier living and exploring of MSE. There may be diffuseness and diversity in retired life but "retirement" is a valued and distinctive ministry! Part of this distinctiveness may be, for some, to avoid the lure (and the pressure) to take on a greater role in the local church, and instead continue with the distinctive aspects of MSE. We need to be able to find support in this option.

Concluding observations.

- This is a time for rediscovering our true selves, distinct from the positions we occupied and the roles we played. For some this could include recognition of our "lay-ness", for most it is a move towards fuller humanity.
- It is a time to be clear about what we are going to retire from and let go of, and to recognise that our feelings about that will include grief. It is also a time for taking up. As part of the whole process we may wish to address afresh the ethical dimensions of the work we have been doing. Reflection is certainly needed if a balance that is right for us is to be achieved.
- In considering our choices we should accept that there is actually no such thing as "spare time". All time is there for us to manage. So for example, we can allocate space in our diaries for re-appraising our commitments. We can pencil blocks into our diaries for "leave", as opposed to activities.
- It is important to remember that we live in contexts. Therefore when considering and reflecting upon our new situation we need to think what effects our retirement may have on others. What would be best for them – e.g. family, professional connections, business interests?
- Some of us come upon retirement suddenly, through redundancy or otherwise but most of us have reasonable time to make preliminary plans, e.g. regarding pensions, whether to move house, etc. When we can, we should make those plans carefully.
- However, though we can usefully glance ahead towards it, and preliminary sketches can be valuable, we cannot usually plan the content of our retirement in detail beforehand and expect those plans to be fulfilled. Until we get close to retirement we cannot adequately sense what the new context will be like.
- Retirement will feel different, and will actually be different, for each person. That is due to our own personalities and experience and to external conditions including timing.
- When into retirement the process of waiting becomes essential. In that process are waiting on God, in dealing with the changes that arrive, (and continue to come along), in striking a balance between "taking on" and "letting go".
- An MSE in retirement may find a particular ministry in sharing his/her experiences and insights with others going through the retirement "rite of passage". CHRISM is ready to help in that sharing process.
- "Expansion takes place when the pressure is released". This is a principle of physics. Another way of describing it is as "re-birth"! Retirement can be just such an event! We should get on with it, and live!
- If anyone asks : "Where is the spiritual dimension?" the beginning of the answer is that whether we are retired or not we actually "live and move and have our being in God"!

This paper is just the beginning of an exploration of what it means to be an MSE in retirement. If you are facing retirement, or are thinking about future decisions for your working life, or if you have experiences of the retirement process which you would like to share please contact CHRISM through the author on Tel 0208 651 1815 or E-mail keith-holt@molend90.freeserve.co.uk

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