

A working spirituality - a secular sacrament

Heather Pencavel

A long-standing member of CHRISM, Heather explores what being a Minister in Secular Employment has meant for her. Lay or ordained, in paid or voluntary work, her insights can speak to all 'members of a royal priesthood'.

In the 'secular' context in which I tried to explore ministry for over eight years, my company knew I was 'some kind of vicar', but that was considered no more than an eccentric hobby. The workplace required my professional skills - no need for spiritual skills here! Yet I found it was possible to explore and sometimes to offer ministry in this context and to develop a working spirituality.

There was first a ministry of **identification** by which as an ordained person I shared the same pressures and stresses, the same sense of achievement and satisfaction as the people with whom I worked. When we were privatised, in 1994, my salary and working conditions [like everyone else's] were at risk: when the company's major contract had to be renegotiated three years later my job and my income were again on the line. And I shared in the bonus when the contract was won! This intimate sharing of common life is also a sharing in the Incarnation: God present in the flesh and fabric of the world. Out of it, for me, came a way of praying that was less a disciplined exercise and more occasional 'orgies' of thought, reflection and writing. God, I discovered, seemed to live somewhere in the innards of my computer!

I found too a ministry of **Proclamation**; the Ministry of the Word. Proclamation is perhaps stretching it a bit. The Word of justice and love was usually scattered among many other words, spoken where ever possible in interviews, conversations, training sessions and meetings; told in language which ranged from that understood by students with special educational needs to the more obscure reaches of 'management speak'. One of the techniques used in the planning in my company was 'envisioning', imagining what as professional people we would like to offer as good service, if we had no limitations on resources. The Chief Executive liked to suggest that we 'know what good looks like' when we begin to plan. On one occasion he wrote the phrase on a flipchart but he made a spelling mistake and wrote 'Know what God looks like'. He nodded to me and said 'That's more your department than mine I think.' In the work environment it's vital to 'know what good [God] looks like' and to affirm that vision for other people, and try to hold the love and justice of God before them when they are in danger of following some lesser purpose.

Out of this day to day reflection comes the deep conviction that God and good are 'not far from every one of us... in whom we live and move and have our being'. I also found myself 'exploring' the **confessional** aspect of ministry: wrestling with the fact that we live in a world of compromise and sin, and, more often than not, the company, and I along with it, fail to make decisions based on principles of love and justice. There are always ways to justify such decisions, and sometimes I knew that I had to accept what was done. But I was clear that as a Christian minister I must not bow before the company image without being aware of the need for penitence and of the mercy and forgiveness of God. I can understand how Naaman felt when, he realised that he would still be obliged to accompany his king to the temple of Rimmon and bow to the false god when his master did. 'May Yahweh forgive your servant for doing this,' he prayed. And so sometimes, did I.

It was important to be clear with myself and with others that a necessary decision may not always be an ethical one, and that we are dishonest if we persuade ourselves otherwise. Of course this may not always make one popular! I'm rather tentative about this aspect of ministry, because I know how easy it is to fail in it.

You may wonder that I have so far made no mention of a **pastoral** ministry. This is the aspect of ministry that fits most comfortably with most people when they think of ministry in secular employment. Surely the problems and stresses of working people, of unemployed clients and young people embarking on career decisions, must offer plenty of opportunity for pastoral care. Well, yes. There was certainly a good deal of personal pain and distress among both staff and clients and I, and others, did what we could to care for people with love and patience. That was no more than part of

our human responsibility towards one another. We were, after all, in one of the 'caring' professions. I do not think that I was called to a pastoral ministry in my work place than any other person: if I were no doubt God would have provided the skills and the inclination!

I discovered too that in the workplace I had a profoundly **Eucharistic** ministry. We are ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament- if the ministry I offer in my daily work is to be properly identified with the ministry to which I was ordained, there needs to be a sacramental dimension. I believe that work can be sacramental a vehicle for encounter with God but that it is not always so. Bread and wine only have sacramental significance in the context of the 'liturgy of the offering of life'. Sometimes even among a demoralized and cynical workforce coping with almost continual restructuring, there were moments of deep encounter when laughter was close to tears. In this context, work is a sacrament offered in and for the broken structures of the world's economic systems, so that they can be redeemed and the ministry of offering that sacrament and affirming its reality is one which I was privileged, for eight years, to call mine as a Minister in Secular Employment.