

The Nature and Value of MSE

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Starting with a current development in Australia, Peter, MSE and Director, Research and Reach-Out, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The University of Hull, raises a number of issues about the role of MSEs and the ways in which the Churches as organisations 'model' their activities and personnel. It implicitly invites further comment and shared experience. I would be particularly interested to hear from our Antipodean and Permanent Deacon members. Comments from outside the Anglican community would also be interesting. Ed.

The Diocese of Sydney is planning a new permanent diaconate whose members will be selected and trained according to different criteria than those of priests (Church Times 5th November 2004). Whilst there is nothing particularly new or radical in the idea of a permanent diaconate, this particular proposal is underpinned by a theology of priesthood that is quite new. "For us", said assistant bishop Dr Glenn Davis, "priesthood is concerned with incumbency rather than with eucharist". This view of priesthood is clearly at odds with both Catholic and Reformed traditions within Anglicanism. However, I believe it also has implications for the theology and practice of the Minister in Secular Employment (MSE) which may not be immediately apparent but which are, nonetheless, profoundly important.

I take odds with the suggestion that the work of a priest can be reduced to, or expressed simply in terms of, his or her function within the parish, and I argue that the Sydney proposal is likely to undermine both the function of the traditional Anglican parish, and the work of priests who act as incumbents within the parish structure. Incumbents can act as incumbents because they are priests. It does not follow at all from this that a priest's identity as a priest is dependent upon his or her function as an incumbent, even though this is the setting in which most of the work of most priests is undertaken. According to the Book of Common Prayer, priests are those who have the authority to absolve sinners, to preach the word of God and to administer the sacraments. More modern versions of the ordinal also emphasise the responsibility of the priest to act as servant and shepherd among the people.

To me, the new Sydney theology of priesthood-as-incumbency looks as if it is moving away from the view of the priest as one with authority and responsibility, and towards an understanding of the priesthood in which his or her primary function is to occupy a role within an organisational structure. I note with interest that members of the new, permanent diaconate will be able to resign their orders for a time. According to the Church Times article, the Diocese of Sydney thinks this might be an attractive option for women deacons who might wish to step down from their role for a while to raise a family.

I ought to explain that my own understanding of Holy Orders was formed within a low church, Evangelical tradition, and I am far from believing that ordination bestows a changed ontological status on its recipient – the so-called "mark on the soul" – but I firmly believe that the privilege of ordination brings with it a life-time of responsibility. I am ordained (as a deacon) all the time – at church, at work and at home. I simply cannot understand how I could simply stop being ordained for a bit, and then perhaps pick it up again later. Ordination is for life – its not a part-time calling. There is a curious paradox in the possibility of a permanent deacon being able to function temporarily in that role.

Of course, the logic behind temporary permanent deacons makes sense if you believe that ordination is really about fulfilling a function within a bureaucracy, and I suggest that a bureaucratic ecclesiology can be found behind the Sydney plans. A bureaucracy is a particular type of organisation. It tends to have a pyramidal structure with a clear hierarchy of authority and a chain of command stretching from the top to the bottom. People who work within a bureaucracy have clearly defined roles. Occupancy of the role carries with it a clear set of tasks and expectations. In a bureaucracy, performance is regulated by explicit operating procedures, and sanctions are applied when things go wrong. Bureaucracies are great if you want a uniform product of known quality at a fixed price. That's why McDonald's restaurants are run like that. But the bureaucratic model also has its

limitations. It restricts creativity, it won't tolerate dissent, and it can't respond quickly to change. Thus, I suspect that the model of priesthood-as-incumbency will undermine the independence of the parish, bringing it more closely under central control, whilst simultaneously altering the character of ordained ministry by turning those who, as priests, have the authority to preach and administer the sacraments and the responsibility to serve and shepherd, into branch managers.

I am also concerned about the implications of the proposal for the work of non-stipendiary ministers, some of whom are priests and deacons. If we define priesthood as incumbency we assume that the boundary of God's operation in the world coincides with the parish boundary. Experience shows that this is not the case. Christians in the secular workplace regularly encounter people and situations in clear need of Christian presence and witness and, frequently, they find that God is already at work there. I think that this is the experience of many Christians at work. But since my own ordination, I have also begun to discover that there is, in all of this, a contribution to be made by the ordained person. Sometimes this contribution involves the direct provision of pastoral care, such as listening to a colleague who has been bereaved. At other times, it involves supporting lay Christian colleagues in their ministries at work, sometimes just by being there. I believe that, although the primary Christian witness to the secular world is made by lay people, they can be encouraged and facilitated by non-stipendiary deacons and priests working along side them. The boundaries of the Church of God do not coincide with those of the Anglican parish, and I see no reason why the functions of ordained women and men should be defined as though they do.