

Twenty Years a Misfit

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*They gave him a job that could not be done.
He smiled as he went to it.
He tackled that job that could not be done
And found that he could not do it.*

It is my firm conviction that the challenges faced by MSEs over the past couple of decades are being faced by their clergy colleagues – both NSM and Stipendiary in the field of Parish ministry. It follows that the church's establishment could circumvent much frustration, stress and wasted effort by considering the observations of MSEs.

Since being ordained in 1982 to become NSM curate in a country parish, I have often been reminded that non-stipendiary means second-class. Nothing wrong with that really but there have been occasions in the past twenty years when I and others like me have striven for a recognition of our ministry only to have our usefulness to the Church equated to our ability to mimic the role of Parish Priest. The only model in which ministry could legitimately happen has always been the Parish Model. 'Pretend Priests' with full time secular jobs are clearly unable to contribute on equal terms.

Where were the role models for those ploughing a lonely furrow?

If the Parish was the only area of legitimate ministry for NSM – why did it not feel legitimate? I was always conscious of how far short of expectations I fell. *Whose expectations?* The 'Real Priest' is a competent and gifted shepherd in charge of a flock of lost sheep. The NSM is part of the flock really – but somehow qualified to stand in for the real leader on occasions.

If the non-existing role model was a problem it ceased to be so after the early years. I was fortunate to meet Michael Ranken around 1984. Just meeting up with one other NSM like Michael was a meeting with one of the few kindred spirits in my particular neck of the woods. Our discussion was a veritable catalyst that enabled me to recognise the ministry in which I was unconsciously engaged. The community at the work-place was united in its adherence to a secular employer but as varied and fragmented in its range of spirituality, needs and gifts as any over-large congregation in any Parish. Despite the affirming usefulness and response to my priesthood at work, the Church in its wisdom continued to disregard any kind of ministry that was not of the Parish. Once I stopped looking for official affirmation, life as a minister became more sustainable with a sense of real relevance to the Gospel.

If you have become bored with my treatise on attitudes to NSM/MSE bear with me. I believe the stipendiary priesthood now finds itself in the wilderness that we tentmakers trod earlier.

Currently there is a shortage of priests and a lack of funds to pay for more. Those clergy who are being stretched too far still strive desperately to carry out the obsolete functions of the older structures. To quote Wesley Carr in his 1985 book, 'The Priestlike Task',

"The power of God is believed to be available as resource, so that the church feels that it must be able to accept every expectation and meet every need."

Look around! One minister to many parishes; house for duty; long clergy vacancies while the lay teams search the horizon for a new 'shepherd'. All these are part and parcel of the life of the church in the twenty-first century. The early retirement of more than a few stipendiary clergy suggests that life in the vicarage has more than its fair share of stress. In the secular world, employers who wantonly expect employees to cope with increasing work-loads and broadened responsibility pay the price of firms on a downward spiral. To plead for help or guidance appears to produce little response other than a reminder that true believers lean on the Lord and He is sufficient for their sustenance. Fundamentalist people managers are a dangerous species in the real world! In the church they get away with it because if you do not cope, it is because your personal faith is lacking. To quote Wesley Carr again,

"No church can offer its ministry of priesthood unless its organisation is reasonably congruent with its task."

It may not appear so from the holy heights but down at the sharp end where ministry happens the organisation appears to bear little relationship to the traditional task to which its ministers feel called. It is a short-term solution always to buttress the thinly spread clergy with retired, NSM and LOM colleagues and thus maintain the delusion that the 'old style' of ministry will survive.

The incongruity of position felt by MSEs – being expected to contribute because of *'musts and oughts'* within an irrelevant system - has been rather guaranteed to produce a feeling of personal incompetence and unreadiness for the task. Incongruity for ministers of all sorts, stipendiary included, comes from the striving to manage an overload of responsibility combined with an 'official' anticipation that a minister worth his/her salt will be able to cope.

Thank God for a supportive (multinational company) employer who gave me the strength to carry on a ministry within a spiritual organisation that was, and is, less compassionate in its management of people than many of its secular counterparts.

The priest of today and tomorrow needs people management skills that are neither taught to ordinands or new priests, nor are they even recognised as important – or relevant – by the church's Personnel Department. My heart goes out to ministers who are driven by a sense of vocation but trapped by *'musts and oughts'*. It just will not work in the way it used to. Neither will the transfer of those *'musts and oughts'* motivate the lay teams in any parish to give of its best. They can also be a pretty good deterrent to would-be new church members!

It is time to listen to MSEs who have been there before and have developed a style of leadership that does not depend on positional authority. We may have been seen for the past decades as a weird species living on what it could scavenge from the wild where it dwells. However, we have been in that area where the central supportive structures seem to be pretty well non-existent.