

***Worker-priests / Priest-workers***  
***Failed experiment – unanswered challenge –future possibility***

*Hugh Valentine*

... also known as Non-Stipendiary Ministers, Ministers in Secular Appointment, Self-Supporting Ministers, Tent-makers, Bivocational ... (aaarrgh! Stop, stop!).

My formative spiritual development took place amidst the hospitality of the Quakers (Society of Friends). I became a Friend in 1976 (Sheffield's Hartshead Meeting) and I remain in membership but via various (unexpected) steps was ordained priest in the Church of England in 1989. I am cautious about talk of 'vocation' but when the question concerning ordination took up residence in my mind, I was troubled. I soon realised that the disquiet I felt came not so much from the possibility that I should or might be ordained, but from the social and professional setting I assumed it demanded. That setting was what we regard (unhelpfully) as normative for those ordained priest: stipend and housing from the church; assignment to a particular parish; and end to any previous work or employment, and some kind of elemental separation from others.

My disquiet slipped away when I stumbled on the existence of what the church called non-stipendiary ministers (NSM). This is bad nomenclature: it is generally discourteous to describe people by what they are not. To describe someone ordained to 'the office and work of a priest in the church of God' by saying they are not paid is clumsy, at best. So far as I could tell I had trained for professional social work from a sense of vocation and I believed that since the possibility of an additional vocation to the priesthood had arisen in that setting then it made sense to assume that was where I was to exercise it. I am grateful to the then Bishop of Stepney (Bishop Jim Thompson) for supporting me in that.

This process seemed to me to link directly to the experience of my spiritual formation amongst Quakers. British Friends have no ordained or paid priesthood - emphasising instead the 'priesthood of all believers'. Whilst I had to recognise that becoming an episcopally ordained priest in the 'one holy catholic and apostolic church' was a step too far for some Friends to stomach or support, I saw that being a worker priest did contain some acknowledgement of Quaker doctrine on ministry, and its position on what the founder George Fox dismissively called hireling priests.

I trained part time for three years on the Southwark Ordination Course whilst working as a social worker in Bermondsey and Westminster. I chose to reject the 'non-stipendiary minister' title and use worker-priest instead. This was not to offend stipendiary clergy colleagues (though a few were offended, for they supposed it implied that they did not work), nor was it to suggest that I was following the model of the French clergy who adopted that term. Their enterprise made mine look feeble.

***The French Experiment***

In France in the 1950s the Roman Catholic Church approved as a missionary experiment a novel deployment of some of its priests. They were to work alongside 'ordinary' people in large factories, share their lives and thereby reverse the tide of secularisation and 'win men (sic) over to Christ'.

From all accounts, it did not quite turn out like that. One thing it did do was to radicalise some of the priests involved. Their consequent involvement in trades unionism and in the daily demands and compromises most working people face alarmed the hierarchy of the Roman church. It is claimed that the Vatican ordered the experiment to cease. Whatever the actual reasons, they were clothed in the assertion that paid 'secular' employment was inconsistent with the calling and office of a priest.

### ***The Church of England***

Canon Law and the Bishops' Regulations were changed in the 1960s to allow men (it was only men at that time) to be ordained priest and continue in 'secular' employment. It would seem that the main driver was not theological but practical - there were insufficient priests to support all the parishes (if some reader believes this is untrue and unfair please let me know). So the 'normative' model of priesthood (stipend, parish, separation) was maintained and there was no explicit theological assertion that it might be right for a number of working men and women from all professions and jobs to be ordained.

Since then the Church of England has ordained many 'NSMs'. They provide immeasurable additional resource. Yet the majority of dioceses do nothing to provide specialised support to them and instead appear to treat them as 'assistant' clergy. There are very few deans or dedicated clergy chapters to support these 'tentmakers', no approach to theological formation or ministerial review which really engages with the issues raised for those who work in so-called secular employment, and very little by way of the recognition handed out to 'full timers' - the honorary canonry or position of helpful influence in such things as candidate selection, bishops' councils or cathedrals.

Part of the responsibility for this state of unrealised potential must rest with those of us who believe ourselves called to exercise a priestly ministry outside the traditional structures of parish and church. In England at least we appear not to have found a coherent voice, or to articulate a convincing case, or to have mounted an effective challenge (friendly, of course) to the 'normative' model of priesthood or (more necessary still) the creeping condition known as 'clericalism'.

### ***Failed Experiment?***

No. It is clear that the aspirations of the first worker priests were not realised, and that a great gulf remains between the world of work and the priest's calling as presently understood. But the answer to the question has to be no because so little time has passed. I remain optimistic that the future may yet surprise us. So I prefer to think of it as an experiment that has got off to a poor start, and awaits another gust of inspirational wind.

### ***The obstacles***

Like all institutions, the church is concerned with control and survival. These are often buried motives - subconscious - so this ought not be read as any criticism of individuals or a comment on their considered actions.

Organisations tend to be self-replicating. Candidates for non-stipendiary ministry in England tend to be like those doing the selecting - safe, middle-class and mainly conformist. We lack models of ordained men and women who manage effectively to discharge their duties as priests and who operate in a range of posts, jobs, roles and professions and who see these as being the places they pray, witness and celebrate the link between the transcendent and immanent.

The living out of the priest's office seems often to drift from the ontological and inspirational to the functional and tired. Of course there are exceptions, but many parish clergy drift towards becoming museum attendants: preserving the artefacts, discouraging innovation and preferring well behaved visitors who admire the exhibits.

### ***The possibilities***

We never know when a new, vibrant wind will blow through our tired lives and structures; so there is always room for a realistic hope and confidence in humankind and in God. There may emerge one or more bishops and others with a sense of what is possible in this sphere, and start a ball rolling.

When we get tired of postmodernism and start digging around in the muck and muddle of human possibility, the mystery of God and the promises of the Gospel, we may see developments we cannot now dream of.

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