

Ministers-at-Work

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Editorial

Happy New Year! We all hope it's a better one than 2023 but as I write, the Post Office Horizon scandal is in the headlines, the NHS is struggling with industrial action as well as winter pressures, conflict rages in Gaza and Ukraine, UK forces are attacking Houthis in Yemen, latest figures show the world progressing relentlessly towards climate catastrophe. It looks almost certain to be an election year for the UK too.

Members have written reflection on some of these issues. Rob Fox tackles the challenges of governance in complex organisations and the role of MSEs in senior positions. Margaret Trivasse has given us a powerful poem, translated from French, on the plight of migrants making desperate crossings of dangerous seas. I've contributed a sort of lament for the state of NHS dentistry. Very unusually, NHS dentistry is in the headlines as I write too. Programmes of supervised toothbrushing in schools has been suggested. They are a well-established intervention with good evidence of effectiveness in preventing tooth decay and even cost-effectiveness. Yet the policy has stirred surprising controversy and cries of "nanny state"! Here too are thoughts on other faiths in the workplace and their celebrations of light. Finally there are some useful links around helping the green transition at work. But first is Hugh Williamson's piece, which first appeared in the Church Times, at the 60 year celebration of the first ordinations to Self Supporting Ministry.

As ever, we welcome your responses, thoughts, and reflections in prose, poetry or images. There might still be time to book for the fabulous February reflective weekend – but hurry!

Rebecca Craven



Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the first ordination of SSMs in 1963

Hugh Williamson

This article is based on an article which was published in the Church Times in September 2023.

The expansion of heavy industry, the early shoots of today's consumer society, the growth of an industrial working class; Britain in the decades after World War II was in a period of rapid change. Social attitudes were shifting also towards the role of the Church in everyday life. Concern was growing in parts of the Church of England that the institution was seen by many as too establishment, out of touch with the sensibilities of working people and their communities.

One of the initiatives in response to these concerns marked its 60th anniversary in 2023. The Southwark Ordination Course (SOC),

whose first cohort of 13 ordinands graduated in September 1963, was at the time, a truly radical idea – to offer part-time ordination training to those in secular jobs, enabling them to remain at work after they became ministers.

The course was the brainchild of Melvyn Stockwood, bishop of Southwark, one of Britain’s most colourful and controversial Church figures of his day. The Church, he argued “should get alongside those in society who (have) no inclination to go near the church”. The SOC can be seen as one of the foundation stones of the work of today’s Self-Supporting Ministers (SSMs), many of whom combine paid work and parish duties.

A seminar and special service in Southwark Cathedral took place on 9 September to “celebrate the 60th anniversary of the first ordination of SSMs in 1963”.



Southwark Cathedral and the Shard, London. Tristan Surtel, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Prebendary John Lees, national SSM officer and one of the event organisers, commented that the SOC was a “brave experiment” and that the anniversary marked many areas of achievement. But it was

also a “wake up call” to the Church of England in its approach to ministers in secular work. “Part of the vision from that time has been lost by the Church. A new focus on ministry in the workplace would be inspiring”.

It was no coincidence that Melvyn Stockwood founded the Southwark course. His bold, often flamboyant gestures and ideas, and readiness to break with Church traditions, divided opinion like few others. John Mantle, in his book “Britain’s First Worker Priests”, opens his section on the SOC thus: “One of London’s senior clergy is reputed to have remarked that he was ‘thinking of having the Thames widened’ when he heard of the elevation of Melvyn Stockwood to the diocese of Southwark”.

The men joining the priesthood in the post-war period – and it was only men at the time, and for several more decades – came almost exclusively from Britain’s middle and upper classes, many from public schools and elite universities. After going straight into ordination training at conventional residential courses, parish priesthood immediately followed.

Stockwood, and others involved, including John Robinson, bishop of Woolwich, had a different vision, that of working-class men given the chance to train for the priesthood on a course tailored to their needs, and then given the opportunity to carry out their ministry in their workplaces, as ordinary workers. Stockwood had the idea of, for instance, a Eucharist among dockers, presided over by a docker. He was not alone in seeing the need for the Church to engage with the world of work. In France since the 1940s, hundreds of Catholic priests had left their parishes and taken manual jobs, living out their Christian mission, as they saw it, to work alongside ordinary labourers and thereby show a radically different face of the Church. Reports of

the activities of these priests had been circulating in British Church circles since the early 1950s.

In Britain, a much smaller group of worker priests was forming, inspired in part by their French counterparts, though the British priests were Anglicans. These worker priests, including coal miners and factory workers, also saw the urgent need to show through their own working lives that the Christian faith was about more than parish priesthood and Sunday services. My father, Canon Tony Williamson, was a member of this small network, that called itself the Worker Church Group. He worked as a forklift truck driver in a car factory in Oxford for 30 years.

Industrial missions, with ordinands and others getting work experience and sharing the Christian message in industrial settings, were also gaining prominence in this period. The mission in Sheffield's steel plants, led by Ted Wickham, later bishop of Middleton, was a well-known example. Stockwood was aware of these developments and sought their influence on his course. He separately invited my father and John Rowe, an ordained electrician in a London brewery and member of the Worker Church Group (WCG) to give talks to SOC ordinands. He went so far as to ask my father to move with his family to Southwark to engage as a worker priest there (he declined).

“The clergy have to go right in with the workers by being one of them” said Stanley Evens, canon residentiary at Southwark cathedral, at the culmination of the first course in 1963. If that was his, and Stockwood's vision, the reality looked somewhat different. While the course was ground-breaking in providing opportunities for part time study for working men, it was much less successful – in its first cohort and in later years - in attracting working class ordinands or in training priests in manual work.

The first cohort of 13 ordinands were professional or white-collar workers, such as an electrical engineer, a headmaster, a British Railways official, a chartered surveyor and a solicitor. Five of the group continued in their jobs, while eight became stipendiary curates in Southwark.

The Church Times, in a September 1963 article titled 'Part-Time Ordinands: Southwark Experiment nearing its Climax', reassured readers that the course did not represent an easier path to priesthood. "For these thirteen the course has been a severe test of vocation. They are the survivors of a total of ninety who first applied for places. Those eventually selected numbered thirty-one". Some dropped out to join more conventional courses, others after questioning their vocation.

Mantle speculates that the academic rigours of the course may have put off students with weaker academic backgrounds. The students had evening lectures at Chapter House in Southwark, and weekend sessions and summer schools at Wychcroft, the diocesan centre at Blechingley, Surrey. This structure enables "married men to train for the ministry without separating from their families and permits a man to do his theological thinking while still following the occupation for which he trained in his younger days" the Church Times noted.

The course was innovative in other ways. "Where else would one find a college that organizes 'weekends for wives' when father goes back home to look after the children while mother goes to Blechingley to meet other wives?"

SOC students in later years remember other ordinands like them in full time work, but little focus on theological or more practical aspects

of being a minister in secular employment. Rev Michael Skinner, who started the course in 1973 and went on to be a senior civil servant in the Department of Health, says “The course didn’t focus on being a minister at work. I found it useful as it trained me to be a priest”. Since retirement 20 years ago Rev Skinner has been a parish priest in Orpington, south-east London. He has fond memories of one aspect of the training. “The course held some of its sessions in the lecture theatre at Guy’s Hospital, so I still associate the Old Testament with being surrounded by pathological specimens in jars around the lecture theatre walls”.

Hugh Valentine, a priest in secular employment, joined the course in 1986. He valued the role of the then principal, Martin Baddeley but otherwise found the lecturers “rather churchy; the overall approach was certainly not radical”. Nevertheless, Valentine, who was an inner-city social worker at the time, appreciates the opportunity the course gave him to “experience the tension and dialogue” between theology and his secular work. His journey every week to course sessions in Christchurch, Southwark took him over the Hungerford footbridge. “It became an image in my mind, of the gap between the ‘church as institution’ and the world of paid work. A gap I hoped to bridge in some small way”. He also remembers Wychcroft, and the powerful image in the chapel of ‘Christ the Worker’, depicting Jesus wearing a labourer’s apron, arms outstretched.

Stockwood retired as bishop in 1980, and while the programme he created became an important blueprint for similar courses, he remained critical of the direction the SOC had taken. “I wish more (students) had come forward as worker priests...There were too many professionals and civil servants” he told a correspondent in 1984. Members of the WCG also made clear the distinctions between their focus and that of the SOC. The SOC’s training

approach was endorsed a few years later by a report prepared within the Church of England. The 1968 study, known as the Welsby report, encouraged the development of other part-time courses for non-stipendiary ministers.



Rev Hugh Lee, former SSM officer in Oxford diocese, became aware of SOC as a role model in the mid-1970s when he was looking for an ordination course he could combine with his work as an energy economist at the National Coal Board and later at the International Energy Agency. He had applied to join the SOC years earlier after leaving Cambridge University but was told to get some work experience and then reapply. Living in the Oxford diocese at the time, he heard of a local course for non-stipendiary ministers (what was to become the Oxford Ministry Course) and applied. “Everyone (associated with the course) knew about the SOC and could see it was a success. For this reason other visionary bishops, such as Kenneth Woollcombe in Oxford, decided to set up such a course”. The Oxford course was one of the first after the SOC, he adds.

There are now 14 part time non-residential courses recognized by the Church of England. The SOC itself has evolved. In 1994 it merged with the Canterbury School of Ministry to become the Southeast Institute of Theological Education (SEITE). In 2015 SEITE became St Augustine's College of Theology, and soon after relocated to Malling Abbey, Kent. The course keeps strong ties with Southwark, says Alan Gregory, principal of St Augustine's. Some teaching takes place at Trinity House in Southwark, and the course also uses Wychcroft for weekend studies.

Gregory says the course has “diversified beyond Mervyn Stockwood’s vision” in pace with changes in society. Women students were accepted in 1994 and students these days are much more diverse than 60 years ago. Around one-fifth of students have a UK minority ethnic background, a number are neurodiverse and many have had limited or difficult educational backgrounds. “Just the other day, a new student was on a site tour and, entering the library, said he had never been in such a room before”. There are regularly an equal share of women and men on the ministry ordination course at St Augustine's, and unlike the first course at SOC, there is a very low drop-out rate, because ordinands have already passed through a diocesan discernment programme.

Gregory sees important elements of continuity with the founding principles of SOC. “We are proud of being their grandchild” he says. Gregory met Stockwood several times while a student in London. “He saw that if you give a wide range of people the opportunity to be clergy you bring in experiences of the Christian faith that you otherwise wouldn't have”. He says a core idea of the SOC was that a “centre of gravity” of the Church was in the workplace. He endeavours to keep this focus in the courses St Augustine's offers, though he wishes more of his ordinands would see the workplace as

central to their ministry. “This core vision mustn’t be lost but we (in the Church) are in danger of losing it. Allowing it to be lost would be a tragedy but also a massive own goal”.

Prebendary Lees sees his task as preventing this own goal. He helps to oversee the National Network of SSM Officers and Advisors. SSMs have become an increasingly important support for the Church, making up around 30 per cent of licenced ministers. More than half of SSMs – around 51 percent - are women, Lees notes, a much higher share than the 32 per cent of women among stipendiary ministers. A majority of SSMs are oriented to parochial work but there is also a sizable number of ministers in secular employment who see their work as an important focus of their ministry. The Church needs to do more to value and support all SSMs, including the latter group, Lees argues.

He sees signs of progress. Last November the Ministry Council of the Church of England and the National Network agreed a five-page report providing ‘Best Practice Guidelines’ in the way dioceses support SSMs. The document, agreed in the context of the 60th anniversary year, was circulated to dioceses by the Archbishops’ Council in May 2023.

While SSMs “make an important contribution to the life the Church of England”, the report notes, “concerns remain about the extent to which SSMs are recognized and offered opportunities for development...Ordained ministers need to have confidence that their ministry is valued regardless of whether they receive a stipend”. Practical recommendations include steps by bishops and others to discourage “sometimes explicit assumptions that SSMs are second class clergy”. The role of SSMs should be recognized in diocesan communications, and in vocations materials and processes.

“Recent initiatives aimed at attracting people to stipendiary ministry have been successful”, Lees notes, “but a new phase is required to look at attracting younger SSMs from a wider range of backgrounds”. Julie Conalty, bishop of Birkenhead, agrees that there is “still a sense of SSMs being invisible” and not valued as much as other ministers. “This needs to change”. Bishop Julie, preacher at the special service on September 9, is herself a former SSM. After university she worked as a homeless and night shelter manager, before moving into law enforcement, first as a community support officer and later as a probation officer. She trained for ordination at SEITE – the successor to SOC – and worked for over a decade as a minister in secular employment, before moving into paid ministry in 2010. “My vocation to ordination came as a teenager but ordination was not possible for women at that time. Later my profession was part of my vocation too, my work with offenders. The gospel is clear about the importance of work with the marginalized and those on the edge of society” she says.

By bringing SSMs out of the shadows, the Church will also benefit from the skills and experience gathered by ministers in secular jobs. “We need to value these gifts” she says. “Whether you work full time and take a few services a month or work six days a week as a parish minister, it doesn’t change who you are. It’s your motivation to be a minister that counts” she concludes.

The SOC fell short of its early vision of new training openings for ordinands representing a broader social class, who would explore different ways of being the church in the world. Yet its legacy offers opportunities that the Church, with courage, can grasp.

Hugh Williamson is a writer based in Berlin.

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IF IT WAS YOUR SON

Margaret Trivasse

(counsellor with Refugee Council)

The following poem appeared in French in the April 2023 edition of *Courrier PO* (the journal of the French Worker Priests). The French version was by Jean Saltarel and had been written after the drowning of migrants at Crotona on 26 February 2023. An internet search revealed that the original was written in Italian by Sergio Guttilla on 29 June 2018, marking one hundred people who drowned as they waited for a ship to save them. My translation is based on the *Courrier PO* version but also on another French version which Google produced.



Ocean waves by freestock

If it was your son
You would fill the sea
With ships of any flag.
You would want people together, in their millions
To form a bridge for him to cross.

Caring.

You would never leave him alone.
You would make a shade
So that his eyes do not burn.
You would cover him to stop him being drenched
By splashes of salt water.

If it was your son
You would throw yourself into the sea.
You would kill the fisherman
Who does not lend his boat.
You would scream for help.
You would knock at the doors of governments
To demand his life.

If it was your son
You would be in mourning today.
You would hate the world
And you would hate the ports full of stationary ships.
You would hate those who keep them moored.
Because of them the waves taste of cries.

If it was your son
You would call them inhuman cowards
Because they are.
They would stop you, hold you, block you.
You want to break their necks
Because we are all in the same sea.

But console yourself in your cosy house
He is not your son, he is not your son.
You can sleep peacefully
And above all in safety.

He is not your son.
He is only a son of lost humanity,
Of dirty humanity, who does not make a noise.
He is not your son, he is not your son.
Sleep peacefully, certainly
He is not yours.
Not yet.



*Rough sea on coast near Quiberon Brittany France
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Beyond Horizon – should MSEs take senior positions?

Rob Fox

One of those interviewed in 2017 for the post of Bishop of London was an MSE, Associate Minister to the Parish of St. Owen, Bromham, in the Diocese of St. Albans. Eyebrow raising? Perhaps not when you consider that the candidate had a distinguished career in senior business roles with firms including L’Oreal, Dixons, Argos and Whitbread, and was at that time CEO of The Post Office. In the event Paula Vennells did not make the short-list and another candidate with a background in senior leadership outside the Church of England, Sarah Mullally, was appointed.

The recent (and long overdue) public exposure of the ‘Horizon Scandal’, as it has become known, where The Post Office and software developer Fujitsu dogmatically maintained the infallibility of a computer system and the guilt of over 700 Sub-Postmasters, has again highlighted that MSEs in senior business or administrative positions are just as fallible as anyone else. The fullest account (to date) of the scandal, and the investigative reporting by Private Eye that exposed it, is available at <https://www.private-eye.co.uk/special-reports/justice-lost-in-the-post> and I recommend reading it.

As the scandal came under greater media examination, Paula Vennells resigned her license from the Bishop of St, Albans in 2021, and stepped back from her role on the Church of England Ethical Investment Board, but the damage to The Post Office, and over 700 innocent Sub-postmasters, had already been done.

We have been in this territory before. The Treasurer of HSBC (with a key role in governance) at the time it was embroiled in money

laundering scandals was Prebendary Stephen Green, an MSE in the Diocese of London, and now Baron Green of Hurstpierpoint. In 2013 Paul Flowers, a Methodist minister, fell from grace (and his position as Chairman of The Cooperative Bank), following an unexplained £1.5bn cash shortfall and a sting that caught him buying Class A drugs, earning him the nickname 'the Crystal Methodist'. The Coop Group was subsequently obliged to sell the Bank to cover the loss.

Readers might conclude that having an ordained minister in a senior lay position is potentially toxic, and that MSEs should avoid such advancement. I beg to differ. In the first place, the examples above are rare. There have been others, and less headline-grabbing, over the past few decades, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Next, the headlines generally overlook the many positive contributions made by individuals who are now reviled for one error of judgement, and the very many who made none. Then there are the far more numerous instances of senior figures in business, public administration, or government with no faith affiliation whatsoever whose decisions have been negative for many customers, suppliers, employees or citizens. Gerald Ratner may have been truthful in 1991 when he described his shops' merchandise as "crap", but those who lost their jobs when the retail chain closed down after his utterance weren't laughing.

Apart from Ratner, the cases I've referred to above were examples of a failure in governance. Governance works effectively most (nearly all?) of the time. The problem is that we don't notice it when it's working, only when there is a failure. However, we need to constantly check that governance is working and is still addressing relevant circumstances effectively. I suggest that failures in governance occur for two general reasons:

- Where the circumstances of the instant case are outside what the governance framework envisages (in which case an outcome is that the framework is reviewed and amended accordingly), or
- One or more agents within the process either do not follow the framework, or knowingly feed inaccurate information into the process.

In the Horizon case there is evidence that both characteristics in the second bullet were present.

In respect of the first reason above, effective governance starts by identifying what falls within the scope of governance for the organisation: what do we do, how do we do it, what could go wrong, how do we prevent this, what are the potential consequences of a failure, who / what will be affected? Once a framework for governance is established it needs to be reviewed, maintained, and amended regularly. In particular, have there been any changes in the nature and scope of our activity that the current governance framework does not fully cover, and, if so, what changes must be made to the framework? Testing and review by independent experts is a key part of this process. When something fundamental changes, such as a new IT system being introduced, there is always a risk point for a failure in governance. (In my VAT assurance days, I invariably found that after a system or software change, tax had gone unpaid, often because of an unauthorised shortcut when the new system didn't do what the user wanted it to. A classic failure in governance).

Having a framework and process for governance is, though, just a start. Ensuring they are adhered to is essential. If a building contractor requires specific safety gear to be worn for particular activities, but does not enforce this, then there is a failure in governance.

How we respond to a failure in governance is also central. Is there a process for employees to report failures? How does our organisation treat whistle-blowers? By welcoming their attention to effective governance, or by hounding them out of their role? Are failures denied and covered up, or are they faced honestly and collaboratively to determine what went wrong, how, and what needs to be done to prevent it recurring?

I don't think it is reasonable to argue that where a key person in a governance process (and everyone within an organisation has a role in governance, from cleaner to Chair) is an ordained minister or lay person of faith then their decisions and actions will always be 'right'. This has never been the case. (Note, for example, that the term 'nepotism', comes from nepoti, Italian for nephew, which was an official position in 18th century Italian Catholicism, where a Cardinal would appoint a favoured nephew to make their fortune from exploiting the Cardinal's position). What, though, do we expect from decision-makers? Do we wish them to make evidenced based decisions, adhering to a coherent and effective governance framework, which aims to achieve the best outcomes for stakeholders? Or are we content for decision-makers to do what is best for themselves? I suggest that those coming to decision-making with their faith as well as their informed judgement are more likely to be in the former camp.

Lastly, there is also the matter of presence. Having ordained and lay Christians actively involved in the ordinary day-to-day activities of our society and economy is a tangible sign of God's and the Church's commitment to all of us. We like to divide things into spheres: lay and ordained, sacred and profane, but is that how our world is? MSEs are a sign of God's commitment to the world of work. We have been

called to our work roles just as to ordained ministry; each informs the other.

The Parable of the Talents seems to grasp where we are at as MSEs. Some MSEs reach positions of considerable influence (5 talents), where their decisions and actions affect the lives of many. Other MSEs are in roles of more localised influence (2 talents), where decisions and actions affect fewer 'others', but the effect for them is still as important. Some MSEs spend their working lives in roles where they can't see how their decisions affect others much at all (1 talent). As the master observes to the final servant: even a small action has consequences, think what you could have done. As MSEs we are called to constantly think about what we can do that benefits others, and to go and do it, in whatever work role we are called to.

References

1. See [Paula Vennells: Ex-Post Office boss was shortlisted to be Bishop of London - BBC News](#), and [Paula Vennells - Wikipedia](#)
2. [Sarah Mullally - Wikipedia](#)
3. See [Stephen Green, Baron Green of Hurstpierpoint - Wikipedia](#) and <https://www.ft.com/content/f43e9970-6548-11e6-a08a-c7ac04ef00aa>
4. [Gerald Ratner still reeling 30 years on from gaffe | This is Money](#)
5. Matthew 25:15-30



NHS Dentistry – RIP?

Rebecca Craven

“How do I get a dentist?” people ask me, as if should know, having been until recently on the Dental Register. It used to be an easy question. The answer was to contact the NHS locally or check the NHS Choices website etc. But nowadays these options prove fruitless. Trying this recently online in a rural area I found an instruction to only contact their helpline if your facial swelling was so bad it was interfering with breathing i.e. needed to go urgently to A&E!

“How did we get to this crisis point?” is the question I ask myself as the NHS celebrates its 76 years. Firstly, crisis is not my term but that of a House of Commons Select Committee report in July 2023¹. They concluded there was a “crisis of access” and it was “totally unacceptable in the 21st Century”. The path to crisis has been long. Almost from the start of the NHS demand hugely outstripped supply and dental charges were introduced 1951-52 as a way to ration care. The high street dental practice has always been a small business which provides services to the NHS. Practice principals are self-employed. The way they have been paid has been an important contributor to the current crisis.

Originally, they were paid on a fee-per-item of service basis. There was a menu of over 400 items but essentially there was a small fee for a filling on one tooth surface, more for two surfaces, more still for three and so on. You will spot the temptation inherent is this incentive scheme. More tooth surfaces filled and more dental restorations placed, meant larger fees for the dentist. Thus, the NHS had famously the highest productivity in the world, producing restored, extracted, replaced teeth. But – beware what you

incentivise! It became clear that most of our restorations failed and had to be replaced. The replacements were more technically complex and expensive, older patients might be too frail to undergo the treatment needed. Besides which it became clear that there were ways to effectively prevent or control our two main dental problems (dental decay and periodontal disease) and reduce the problems later in life. What was needed was to incentivise this preventive approach instead of “drill and fill”.



Decayed beyond repair?

Hence, a new contract was implemented in 2006. It paid dentists in three broad bands – basic examination and prevention; interventions and interventions that included a dental lab e.g. crowns, inlays, bridges, and dentures. It was announced as a high trust environment in which dentists were trusted to provide the best care for patients without the need for detailed accounting of technique and materials used. It was reasoned that while some patients would need a lot of care (so dentists’ costs may exceed the fees they were paid), others needed little or nothing and overall it would even out. Crucially this method

of remuneration was not tested before being implemented nationally (....!).

To say it was not well received is to understate the case. Dentists felt they were not being paid to do prevention so mostly didn't provide it. High need patients started to find it hard to access care as dentists preferred to keep with regular well-maintained healthy patients who could largely be relied on to need little treatment. Government pleaded that careful calculations had been made to ensure a smooth transition for practices between the old and new contract systems, based on what they earned in the previous year, but this could mean large differences in rates between adjacent practices.

Within three years, another contract was recommended, and a contract reform process was underway – this time there would be pilot testing! And after 11 years of testing, what elegant solution was produced?

Reportedly nothing much had been learnt (despite over 100 practices having been intensely engaged in it) and only minor tweaks to the current contract were all that emerged. The spokesperson for the BDA (British Dental Association) summed it up –

“In essence, what we are doing at the moment is rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic while the service slowly slips into the sea”.

Predictably, those dentists remaining on the sinking ship are seeking ways to escape. The report had several recommendations for what to do now. It does not include any increase in the number of practitioners but only a change in what they are doing and especially how NHS dentistry is remunerated.

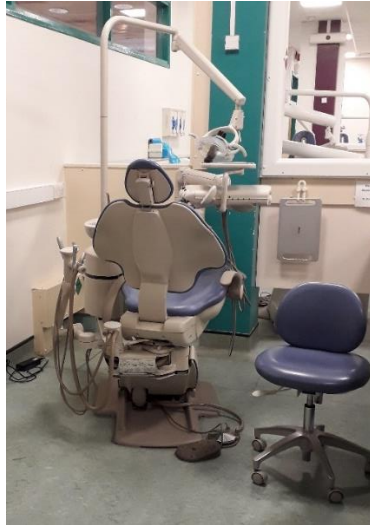
We shall see what future governments make of the recommendations but at a time of many crises and conflicting pressures, it is not high on

the political agenda. Sadly, dental problems have most impact on the poorest worst and those with least voice. They are the ones left in pain and distress. After so long a decline in NHS dental services, the middle classes have mostly taken the hint or been forced into joining a non-NHS dental scheme or arranging private dental care as needed.

This is by way of a public apology from one who was a member of the dental profession and engaged with these issues. We have let down the public we meant to serve. The idea of our collective professional failure is a popular one with politicians. It makes good headlines – money-grabbing dentists abandoning the NHS to make loads of money in private practice. If this is true for some it is only a minority. The vast majority of dental professionals, as I have experienced them, are genuinely highly motivated and wanting the very best for their patients.

How did it go so wrong? Perhaps the dental profession was too trusting of government. Perhaps after even 5 years of piloting surely it might have been questioned why it was worth continuing. Meanwhile, as accessing NHS dental care became more difficult many in the population have become used to not finding it and instead turning to private care and having to pay more for it. At the same time funding to practices failed to keep pace with inflation. No surprise then that patients and dentists have increasingly abandoned NHS dentistry. Dentistry, it seems, will go the same way as chiropody and ear wax removal as no longer part of the NHS for most patients. Of course, as a small and unpopular professional group, dentists lacked leverage. We are promised² a Dentistry Recovery Plan in 2024. The narrative from government will most likely be one of handwringing regret that, despite all the funding and all the work by the Department of Health to improve NHS dentistry, the greedy dentists have abandoned it!

As NHS founder, Nye Bevan, famously said "The NHS will last as long as there's folk with faith left to fight for it". For dentistry it will indeed need lots of faith (love and hope too) and especially, intelligent fighting.



But not for NHS care?

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2. House of Commons. NHS Dentistry: Government Response to the Committee's Ninth Report of Session 2022–23. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmhealth/415/report.html>

Theology Discussion Group – December 2023

Ruth Brothwell

Just before Christmas the Theology Discussion Group met online. This time we were thinking about the Christmas seasonand the diversity we encountered in our workplacesand what did people of other faiths make of Christmas??

It turned out – no surprise really – that we all had stories to tell. The workplace is full of a very diverse mix of people these days. For the MSE it presents a challenge but perhaps also a real door opener opportunity for conversation as people know us, know what we stand for and expect that this will be ‘a busy time of year for us’.

We talked a lot about ‘light’. It’s a picture that pervades many religions so is a real talking point. Diwali, the Hindu, and Buddhist festival had not long happened. Stories were recalled of conversations had and it was a learning curve for many of us that the concept of light coming into the world was not unique to Christianity. Light overcoming darkness was the chief celebration of Hindus and Buddhists alike. Greetings cards were sent to one another with good wishes.

Community, family, and friends figured in all the festivals. Islam celebrates such during Eid al-Fitr following the last day of the great Ramadan fast. Good tidings for the year ahead are offered and shared with one another as special foods are prepared for feasting together. Gifts are offered to family and friends.

The same happens at Hanukkah where Jewish people light the Menorah candles. Readers may recall some concern when world

leaders lit Menorah candles as expressions of solidarity with the Jewish people. The lights of the Menorah provide a message of hope as gifts are shared together.

So, Christianity shares much with other religions at this time of year. We talked about joint celebrations with our colleagues as ways of sharing faith with them. About how we can all come to a better understanding of the meaning of Christmas and learn from one another.

For us, the light of the incarnation shines forth – we all hope you had a very good Christmas, and we wish you a Happy New Year. Hope to see you online soon.



Some Useful Links

Here are resources from the Trade Union Congress to help the green transition at work.

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/its-time-talk-about-climate-leadership-work>

Here are resources from WWF for making the workplace more sustainable. You can also signup to their business newsletter.

<https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/top-20-tips-workplaces-sustainable>

Here's a thought-provoking video "Can Capitalism Solve The Climate Crisis?" from Earthrise

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kECA6DvepYs>

Here's more on one of the alternative economic models from Kate Raworth of Oxford University as a TED talk "A healthy economy should be designed to thrive, not grow".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rhcrbcg8HBw>

Future Events:

CHRISM Theology Discussion Group - Future Meetings

This Discussion Group, which is open to all CHRISM members, provides an online forum where we can reflect on and discuss the theological aspects of our work. We meet monthly by Zoom for an hour and a half. Recent topics have included: The Importance of our Work to God and Us, The Idea of Rest, What is Work?, Justice at Work, The Kingdom at Work Project, Eternal Life, Christian Perspectives on Conflict in the Workplace, Organisational values - Help or hindrance to ministry in the workplace?, Is it OK to be ambitious?, Who is Jesus?, and Neighbourliness at Work.

If you are interested in joining the Theology Discussion Group, please email me at rev.julian.e.blakemore@gmail.com and I will add you to the invitation list so that you receive Zoom links for future meetings.

We look forward to welcoming you.

Revd Julian Blakemore

2024 Reflective Weekend: 16-18 February 2024 at the Kairos Centre

The Kairos Centre is located in Roehampton, south-west London, and is situated within acres of landscaped gardens and overlooking the historic Richmond Park. Titled "Decisions, decisions ...", across the weekend we will explore and reflect upon the importance of ethical decision-making as MSEs, across the contexts in which we minister. What decisions do we face in our work? How does our ministry inform the decisions we take? Is there always a 'right' decision? How best to communicate decisions?

Guest speakers include: The Rt Reverend and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mulally, DBE, Bishop of London; The Revd Annette Fritze-Shanks, Bishop's Adviser for Self-Supporting Ministry; and more!

In the usual format of a relaxing weekend there will be time for both reflective silence and companionship, and the opportunity to explore the area, or have some free time to walk, talk, snooze, reflect, read, pray...



Cost, from dinner on Friday evening to lunch on Sunday, inclusive: £210 (members and spouses); **£225** (non-members).

Day / session rates available on application.

Grants may be available from your Church to help cover the cost – apply now to get their support!

A limited number of bursaries are available to enable attendance; ask us for details or a receipt.

CHRISM can accept payments through GoCardless.

Hurry to book by post (to Rob Fox see rear inside cover) or email to Rob Fox (rob.fox36@gmail.com).

For information on travel and facilities please see

<https://www.thekairoscentre.co.uk/>

12-14 July 2024: Annual Conference and AGM, Luther King House, Manchester.

Save the date!

And Finally.....

An alternative creation story

On the first day, God created the dog and said, "Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. For this, I will give you a life span of twenty years."

The dog said, "That's a long time to be barking. How about only ten years and I'll give you back the other ten?"

And God saw it was good.

On the second day, God created the monkey and said, "Entertain people, do tricks, and make them laugh. For this, I'll give you a twenty-year life span."

The monkey said, "Monkey tricks for twenty years? That's a pretty long time to perform. How about I give you back ten like the dog did?"

And God, again saw it was good.

On the third day, God created the cow and said, "You must go into the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves and give milk to support the farmer's family. For this, I will give you a life span of sixty years."

The cow said, "That's kind of a tough life you want me to live for sixty years. How about twenty and I'll give back the other forty?"

And God agreed it was good.

On the fourth day, God created humans and said, "Eat, sleep, play, marry and enjoy your life. For this, I'll give you twenty years."
But the human said, "Only twenty years? Could you possibly give me my twenty, the forty the cow gave back, the ten the monkey gave back, and the ten the dog gave back; that makes eighty, okay?"
"Okay," said God, "You asked for it."

So that is why for our first twenty years, we eat, sleep, play and enjoy ourselves. For the next forty years, we slave in the sun to support our family. For the next ten years, we do monkey tricks to entertain the grandchildren. And for the last ten years, we sit on the front porch and bark at everyone.

Thanks to Rob Fox for sharing!

CHRISM is on Facebook, 'Ministers at Work':

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/129656640430436/>

and LinkedIn, at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3756477>

CHRISM is the National Association of CHRistians In Secular Ministry

is for all Christians who see their secular employment as their primary Christian ministry, and for those who support that vision. To further this aim, CHRISM publishes a quarterly Journal, releases occasional papers and organises an annual retreat. Conferences are held regularly and worldwide links pursued.

CHRISM welcomes members, both lay and ordained, from all Christian denominations, encourages them to be active within their own faith communities and to champion ministry in and through secular employment.

If you would like confidential support as an MSE, please contact any member of the Committee. **Further information may be obtained from the Secretary or the Journal Editor.**

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