

Mission Advisor's Address to the Synod 2010 Annual Meeting

The Question of Ministry

Last year I spoke about our fear of letting things go - fear of death when our faith tells us that death can lead to new things in God.

This year I want to raise a related topic. Something that holds us tight, but which I want to ask, is it actually based in Scripture?

The subject is ministry, or more particularly, The Ministry.

Let me start by saying this – Ministry is not something we do, it is who we are. Now I've got that off my chest let's look at this.

Over the years our church has engaged in debates as to who could or who could not be involved in The Ministry.

The first I was aware of this was when it related to women.

I followed the debate and as it went on I noted that all parties were quoting the Scriptures to support their particular position. As I thought and prayed through this it seemed to me that the debate had little to do with ministry, but much to do with power. Women looked at the institutional structures of the church and perceived that The Ministry was where power resided and they were being excluded from this. They rightly challenged the church. However no one seemed to see that it was a debate about power not one on the New Testament understanding and practice of ministry. For me that insight has been very helpful in the continuing debates about leadership since. At heart they have been having, and will continue to have, the same debate.

We need to engage in a discussion about the nature and practice of ministry as seen in the New Testament and then look at how that might translate into practice in this church. We seem to assume that our present practice is Scriptural. As yet I'm not convinced it is – it's more traditional. I have a feeling that this is where God is calling us as part of our ongoing re-formation.

I want to raise that discussion today.

I don't for a moment think that I'm an authority on this but I am one who, like you, can read the Scriptures for myself, which our church encourages, and reflect on what I read, which is also encouraged. In doing that I find myself in a deepening disconnect with our church's practice and understanding of ministry. I hasten to add that what I'm about to say is no reflection on those among us who having responded to the call of God, have offered themselves and trained for The Ministry. You have responded to God's call and the institution of the church has directed you into one particular expression of that call. My question is, is that the only expression and is that expression consistent with the Scriptures, especially the New Testament?

One of the foundations of our reformed theology is the priesthood of all believers. I draw your attention to what Graham Redding said at the inauguration of the Southern Presbytery. During his sermon Graham spoke, in part, about the need to move from being a settled church to being a movement. He said that although this might mean planting churches it also means, and I quote:

"Firstly, a rediscovery that the priesthood of all believers is worked out in secular vocations and occupations (not only in serving on church committees and duty rosters); and secondly in terms of churches establishing and encouraging innovative ministries of hope and reconciliation (these will

include, but not be confined to, chaplaincies). Here the emphasis shifts from running congregations to building communities, and from faith as security to faith as risk.

The traditional parish church model that presumes the existence of one full-time stipendiary ministry serving the spiritual needs of its members is already becoming the exception rather than the rule. Along with this, we must seek to eliminate the Christendom tendency to drive a wedge between clergy (the paid “professionals”) and laity (the long-suffering “amateurs”). Instead, there will and must be a recovery of the biblical portrayal of the kleros (clergy) as part of (not apart from) the laos (whole people of God), with ministry belonging to the latter by virtue of their baptism.”
End quote.

Our General Assembly has said the same thing in 2002 which you will know if you have had me to visit!

Interestingly the Church of Scotland says this in its 2001 report 'Church Without Walls' and again I quote:

The Biblical description of leadership in Ephesians 4:12 includes also the apostle, the prophet and the evangelist, along with the pastor and the teacher. According to that passage it takes all five leadership roles to express the “ministry of Christ”. This is a time to recover and reaffirm these other roles of leadership and break out of the reductionism of the pastor-teacher model.

*The “word and sacrament”/ “pastor-teacher” emphasis belongs to the Christendom context,....
..The context of the 21st century is undoubtedly missionary and post-Christendom.*

The collaborative nature of ministry begins by reclaiming these gifts as essential to the full development of the church to be the church of Christ in our times. It will mean taking account of these gifts in the selection and recruitment process and offering the necessary specialist training rather than the omnibus version that assumes that everybody will be a parish minister. End quote

That report is well worth the read.

But let's go back and start with Jesus where all things should start.

The letter to the Hebrews spends a lot of time explaining how Jesus is now the High Priest. Looking at His pre-eminence Chapter 5 says;

⁸ *So even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.* ⁹ *In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest, and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him.*

So what is the role of the priest? A priest is one who stands between a Holy God and sinful people mediating between the two. The extent of this gulf between the Holy God and sinful people can be seen in the details of the rituals proscribed in the Books of the Law. The priest then offers to God prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the sinful people and pleads their cause before God. The priest relates to the people that which God wishes them to hear.

Jesus now fulfils that on behalf of all, if my reading of Hebrews is correct.

However Peter says that all who follow Jesus are priests:

And now God is building you, as living stones, into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are God's holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please him because of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

And further:

⁹ *But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, His very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

All of us who follow Jesus are priests. So what does that mean? We are all called to speak and show the love of God to all those who, as yet, do not have a relationship with Him in Christ. We all are called to intercede on their behalf before this God of love. We are also to uphold each other in our priestly calling knowing that Jesus, our High Priest, stands in the Holy of Holies pleading on our behalf before the Father. I don't profess to understand the implications of all this but such is God's grace I don't have to understand to be able to share in it.

So in terms of ministry what does this mean? I would suggest that with the professionalisation of ministry we have encouraged a defacto Old Testament priesthood. Because institutionalism has focused ministry on the professional, we have disenfranchised and devalued the ministry of all others. The mere fact that we still use the terms lay and ordained support this without the multitude of things that the institution says can and can't happen if a professional is not present. Over the centuries this has lead to the non professional thinking that ministry is not for them. As one expressed it to me when I was leading a parish 'I thought we were to bring the people so that you could do the ministry.' What a travesty of Christian ministry that statement reveals. Yet I don't blame the one who spoke it, they were simply reflecting the reality they had been brought up in. I hear similar statements all around as I travel.

We are faced with some 17 hundred years of tradition and that is not an easy thing to overturn. Also I acknowledge that for most people in our congregations they want a professional because in many ways they feel it gets them off the hook as far as ministry is concerned. They can sit back and say that they are not trained! As I think about this I am mindful of the people of Israel in Samuel's time when they asked for a King - *"Give us a king to lead us, such as other nations have."*

We much prefer to have someone else take the responsibility to tell us what to do and what God wants us to do. That way we don't have to take responsibility ourselves and we can blame others if it all goes wrong.

Where in all this does the Holy Spirit fit? What of the ministries that Paul puts forth?

As followers of Jesus His Spirit dwells within us and is around us, giving us gifts in ministry. And that is clearly set out in Scripture –gifts in ministry are given to **all** followers of Jesus, and some of those will be for leadership among other things. My contention is that The Ministry in itself does not mean leadership. In fact as Presbyterians we actually model collective leadership through elders, some of whom are teaching elders. A teaching elder is not necessarily a leader and to my mind certainly not a CEO. As Presbyterians it would seem to me that CEO's shouldn't even figure if we are true to the Scriptures about collective leadership

So I am suggesting that one of the things we need to start to let die is this traditional understanding of ministry and leadership. Now I know that this is uncomfortable for some and others will want to take what I say to bash others – don't. You see, when we remove the 'death' idea from the abstract to the specific, then that is where it gets uncomfortable. I can conceive of others dying because that is the outcome for all life but to face the reality that that also means me is harder.

We have huge resources in the church throughout the Synod area. We have wonderful gifted people all over the region. We have, in fact, as many ministers of the gospel as there are followers of Jesus in every community throughout Otago and Southland. What we don't have is a way that these resources of people can be enfranchised for ministry by the institution and it is that

disenfranchising which has to die. I realise that it is something beyond the Synod's ability to bring about in the PCANZ, but I am sure, with God's leading and help, we can begin to show a way forward for others. I am convinced that if we don't, then among other things we won't really begin to tackle the root causes of stress and burnout of those in ministry and we will always be playing catch up.

There's a lot of spiritually tired people around us. There are a lot of frustrated people around us. There are a lot of sleeping people around us. What to do? I think the first place to start is to cry out to the Lord for a return of our heritage. When this denomination started in Scotland it was powerfully moved and influenced by the Holy Spirit and its early life reads like the book of Acts, with the sick healed, the dead raised, even the Spirit falling in power on the General Assembly bringing deep repentance to such an extent that, according to one historian, that wherever the Presbyterians went during the Scottish Diaspora, revival followed in their wake. May we see those days again. Another key that I see is a rediscovery of the collective nature of eldership leading and the empowering and releasing of the complete range of ministries that have been given to all followers of Jesus.

There is no doubt that when we are working in the area of our call it is no longer work. It can be hard, it can be challenging, but in the end it is energising.

I know, that's why I enjoy working with you so much. Thank once again for the privilege.

Bruce Fraser April 2010