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The Role of the Ordained Minister Today

THE ROLE is a concept used nowadays by the sociologist to describe the rights and obligations of a person fulfilling a particular function. A man may adopt more than one role. Thus a minister may also fill the role of husband, or parish councillor or cricketer. Questions about consistency and integrity may arise if a person finds that roles are incompatible. Presumably, when we speak of the role of the ordained minister we are thinking chiefly of his function in relation to the Christian community. Reference has lately often been made to his loss of prestige. He has "lost face" as the representative of a declining community and indeed some ministers suffer from a sense of isolation, inferiority or frustration as a result of this loss of prestige, real or imagined. One "points table" referred to by Michael Banton[1] shows the "nonconformist minister" on the same level as the works manager. This estimate may comfort some and irritate others.

There are more important matters than the question of prestige. People are sometimes said to "play a part" and this alternative description of a person's function suggests an element of unreality or make-believe. To play a part does certainly mean a degree of inconsistency or compromise. Thus the waiter conceals personal dislike of a client beneath a veneer of politeness. The shop steward representing the views of his comrades behaves in a manner which surprises those who know him in his private capacity. A minister is not excused from this difficulty. He is required to speak words of comfort and cheer when he does not feel like doing so, and he must maintain the unity of the Christian fellowship sometimes at the price of surrendering his own strongly held views. Thus tension is inevitable.

How far can a minister express his real personality (insofar as he knows it) through his work? "He must be perceived primarily as a priest or minister," says Michael Banton. "His relation with his parishioners must be relatively impersonal, suppressing any individual features which might derogate from his occupational role[2]." According to this view, his role is as much a constraining and limiting factor as a means of self expression. If we think this an exaggerated statement, it does at least identify a factor which affects a minister in common with those who work in very different occupations. A minister's experience has other points of comparison with that of manual workers. Colin Brown notes the possibility of a change of sphere, or even redundancy. He also remarks that Jesus drew his illustrations in the main from those types of work demanding much patient endurance as well as skill, work with uncertain prospects[3]. Ministers are not a race apart but can share the uncertainties, obligations, hardships and opportunities of work.

Indeed recent studies on the theology of work have shown that

Hebrew-Christian attitudes to work do not support idealistic notions about it. Not always, even in professional life, let alone mass production can a person express ideal aims in gainful employment to any extent. His occupation is better regarded as a social obligation which strengthens solidarity with comrades. However, co-operative work can be offered to God, as is suggested by a church mural showing a group of men with the locomotive the product of their joint labours. We are thus reminded that "role" is a word which neglects this vertical dimension and deals only with function in society.

But if we use a more religious word such as "calling" conclusions will not be so different. A good review in the magazine *Fraternal* of *Ministry in Question*[4] ended with the surprising statement that the professional ministry is "the noblest to which a man may be called." Think of Dr. Mackenzie, the heart specialist, pacing up and down all night seeking the answer to disease, or consider even the psychiatric social worker whose painstaking enquiries uncover the facts and pave the way to mental health. Imagine the shop steward whose home is invaded at all hours by people with personal difficulties. Or what of the farmer who goes without holidays year after year and so ensures our food supply. The word calling, used of certain occupations, is really archaic. The fact that nursing calls for a sense of dedication has tended to obscure the down to earth requirements of an adequate wage and decent accommodation. There is no longer any need to suppose that a man called to the bar is any more dedicated than a borough surveyor. We may distinguish if we will those occupations which involve dealing with persons or those which require a long period of preparation, but it seems dangerous to erect a kind of ladder of prestige. In any case, the Biblical use of "call" is corporate as well as individual, and certainly does not restrict the call to a certain order of believers. The whole people of God are called out of the world to witness in the world, and to proclaim that those who repent in faith can inherit the Kingdom. We stand by Peter's message that "the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." Whether we consider the minister's role, or his employment, or his calling, it must be in the context of the whole Christian community. We were greatly indebted to Hendrik Kraemer not only for his book on this theme[5], but for the exemplary way in which he demonstrated it in the pioneer work at Bossey Ecumenical Institute. The Ascended Christ, he reminded us, bestows varied gifts on the membership, but all are to be used to equip the saints for the work of ministry.[6] All are ministers, the servants of Christ who came "not to be ministered unto but to minister." Perhaps this was why the authors of the B.C.C. report *The Shape of the Ministry* chose to use the word "presbyter" of the "regular" or ordained ministry.

We are thus led to the idea of team ministry. This may be regarded as a thoughtful division of labour among the people of God. According to circumstances, leaders will be chosen who will have the con-

fidence of the community and will need to consult the whole body of members in church meeting. According to the traditions of the Baptists, the elders and/or deacons are the chosen leaders, but for what purposes? And what is the role of the minister in relation to the deacons? Chairman? Spiritual adviser? Senior friend? Episcopos, overseer is perhaps the right word. The minister is to see that the deaconate fulfils its proper function in the church economy and plans to ensure as far as possible that each member has a suitable role. He should discuss with the deacons the state of health of the whole membership, not only the needs of the sick and afflicted but the interests of the active majority in the life of the church. It may well be that in a large membership it will be necessary to co-opt additional representatives to the diaconate according to the purpose in view or even to create *ad hoc* organisation so that a particular scheme can be worked out.

It may be objected at this point that the ministry of the Word and Sacraments is the first priority. But even here the minister requires the help of qualified members. One qualification for helping might be a non-academic down to earth awareness of common needs. If Dean Church found he needed to occupy the pews of the village blacksmith, butcher, or baker to prepare suitable sermons in an imaginative manner, in our complex society his equivalent may need help from a variety of folk not only in discussing the sermon after it is delivered but in preparing it beforehand. The experiments of Symonowski[7] in Germany are suggestive in this regard. Again, the relation of worship to work-a-day needs requires more exploration. When the Vicar and I received ICI products at the altar we gained a fresh insight into worship as well as work. Congregational participation in praise and responsive prayers are important, but the subjects chosen for prayer are as important. When the chairman of the Parish Council, a biologist, and a representative of ICI spoke from the pulpit about environmental problems, the subsequent worship was related to local problems. The Lord's Supper in this context offers a golden opportunity for realising we must call nothing unclean that the Lord has provided. The Communion which precedes or follows a common meal robs the service of worship of that sense of unreality which in spite of all our efforts often persists. Here, too, the minister may share leadership with others.

We have seen and indeed it is now generally recognised that a minister cannot possibly discharge the variety of functions which once fell to his lot. At one time, we suffered from the heresy of omni-competence with its related sin of pride. The minister took the senior training class in the Sunday School, kept an eye on the football team if he did not actually play, attempted to visit all the members, made overtures to the Local Authority, preached twice or more on Sunday —you name it, he did it. All this had perhaps one advantage over present day custom. We found ourselves on church premises so often that there was a vivid sense of community. Most of the members were

found there at least once during the week. But this togetherness tended to conceal the rich variety of experience, skill and occupation among the membership. Now the emphasis has rightly changed to the church in its dispersal to the world "outside" there is growing realisation of fellowship as diversity within unity. The church is, or should be at work in the world through the witness of its members and all kinds of exciting possibilities arise for the exchange of ideas and experience. The working out of a missionary strategy becomes possible. A personal confession may be allowed. In my first church were men with wide civic and industrial experience such as the managing director of a large textile company, a borough surveyor, a medical officer of health, workers of all grades. Yet it took a long time even to begin to grasp that combined experience of this kind can open the door to new ways of evangelising.

We can see fresh arguments in this context for the grouping of churches especially when the membership is small. It is a mistake to regard such grouping as simply a means of securing ministerial oversight and regular pulpit supply for a number of churches. Grouping can mean a more realistic cross section of the community as for example where a farming community is linked with a nearby industrial district and both are aware of the needs of an expanding population. Ministerial oversight would then include bringing together for regular fellowship and discussion the members of these communities. This naturally leads to a strategy of approach to the whole area, and this must be ecumenical. For surely help to the handicapped, relations with the police, approaches to industry are matters of concern to all the churches. Where the ministers involved have worked out a basis of mutual understanding, the deployment of resources is more efficient and real co-operation with Social Services departments, Trade Unions, etc., can be developed. If ministers cannot or will not cultivate a fellowship based on common obedience to Christ keen laymen tend to become disillusioned with the organised church. They may forfeit the spiritual help they need and the church certainly loses the leadership which they are in a position to give.

We have been assuming that the church is already present in the secular sphere in the persons of those who work there. Does this mean that the minister will become not so much the leader of mission as a sort of backroom boy who has no real link himself with the world outside the church? Even if this were the case, one could see an opportunity which would tax all his resources. For there is urgent need to develop a counselling service for those who are feeling the strain and tension of modern life in so many ways. He cannot solve the dilemmas and difficulties which arise for the business man day by day but he can give the background teaching and the supporting help which is so much appreciated.

However, it seems a minister must sometimes lead the way and pioneer new spheres of service, perhaps by his unexpected presence drawing attention to the relevance of Christianity. It was in this way

for instance that industrial mission developed during and after the war. Hints of a new approach were to be found in the pre-war days of industrial depression of the twenties and thirties. May I give illustrations here from personal experience? An alderman and a surveyor, conscious of the long queues forming at the labour exchange opposite the church, saw the need for work among the unemployed. Lay leadership was in this case the backroom advice and the actual initiatives had to be taken by the minister. The subsequent efforts put a wedge in the door blocking communication between church and "workers" and kindled the imagination of a wide variety of people. Layman shared also in the wartime developments of industrial mission. It was at the suggestion of an Anglican secretary of the then "Welfare Advisory Panel" along with the Congregational manager of the labour exchange, that approaches were made to a number of managements. Thus permission was granted for a minister to become an "industrial chaplain" to a group of five factories. It is difficult to see how the openings which then occurred could have been accepted by anyone other than a minister who was not on the payroll and whose independent position would ensure some impartiality vis-a-vis the two "sides" of industry.

Now the situation has been opened up in a variety of ways, the function of a minister in relation to industry may change radically. The question is how Christian solidarity may best be expressed within industry. Seminal books and pamphlets like J. H. Oldham's *Meaning of Work* and W. G. Symons *Work and Vocation* were the precursors of a series of publications seeking an answer. We ought to try to discover a line of attack in the current economic confusion. Prophecy has to be allied to practice. Here the minister is only an auxiliary, but as such he can point out the relevance of Biblical teaching. He can sometimes help to reconcile points of view and even personal differences and mistrustful attitudes lying unrecognised at the back of an argument. A sensible approach will bring together those who would not normally meet except perhaps at opposite sides of the bargaining table. Such meetings can take place in a home, a hotel, a college of further education, or wherever opportunity offers. It may involve the tedious job of arranging convenient times, circulating papers, etc., arranging interviews. But if people can be brought to some degree of harmony or to deeper levels of reconciliation, such backroom work is worth while. In due course no doubt retired laymen could be found to undertake this administrative work. *Mutatis mutandis,* the gathering of key people belonging to the same trade or the same milieu or facing the same situation (as for instance in a new town) offers endless scope for Christians with imagination and courage.

Industry is not of course the only sphere where a minister may draw attention to the need for a Christian presence or approach. As is well known, ministers have been exploring the opportunities and difficulties in school religious education. As with the industrial situa-

tion, once openings have been accepted, unexpected possibilities arise. A minister some years ago accepted a post in religious education when specialists were very scarce, yielding to the pressure of a headmaster backed by the H.M.I. He has not felt it right to "witness" through school assembly and indeed has taken as few formal services as possible. By endeavouring to be a sincere member of staff, he writes, "loving little atheists and agnostics as much as Christians" he hopes he has come to be known as simply a Christian man rather than a minister. He has in fact been able to advise and help many young people considering their after school careers. But he feels that a good lay RE specialist could have a wider and deeper influence than a minister and hopes the day may be hastened when more are available.

Mention of this pastoral function within the school context brings to mind another sphere where a minister may open up new avenues but where in the end he will be receiving rather than giving advice to those more qualified than himself. Perhaps I may again give examples based on personal experience. Looking through various note books, there are the names of a great variety of persons outside the life of the church ready and willing to discuss problems more or less private. This must be the experience of many ministers who have not confined their visitation to the church membership. But through mingling with people in their own work or recreational setting, one becomes aware of unspoken needs. May day strike difficulties we have experienced at the Baptist Assembly reminds me of a May day service in the park where members of the Communist party turned up with their banner. Contacts then made led to an invitation to conduct a funeral and the opportunity to bring consolation to a bereaved family. I still keep a letter which shows human need beneath ideology. What about birth? I recall a service in the home of a shop steward whose wife persuaded him to "endure" a service of infant dedication. Ensuing conversation showed appreciation of the purpose of the service.

Death and Birth. What of Marriage? A Personnel Manager (lady) married to an engineer in church rather than the registry office. Boy and girl operatives—with the opportunities of preparation and follow-up. One never knows what may come of the prayers, the gift of a copy of the Scriptures, the friendships formed. Every minister is familiar with this but cases of this kind mean expenditure of time and energy so that some other work will suffer. Should church members be asked to forego pastoral visits? Emil Brunner called for "an enormous extension of the pastoral work of the church." The setting apart of specialist members of the team would seem the only way to achieve this. Training would help avoid pitfalls, especially in the wasteful use of time. I remember the case of a teacher who borrowed from the parents in order to place bets. Getting himself heavily in debt his job was threatened. So the minister tried auditing his accounts, helpers paid off some of the bills, he was treated tenderly or severely, welcomed home, and in the end taken to a psychiatrist

who however was unable to cure him. He disappeared. Incidents like this show the need for the most careful consultation with professional workers who have knowledge and skill. Otherwise much time can be wasted. On the other hand, many social workers are well aware that they cannot possibly give the time to continuous friendly support yet realise this is essential. Hence the setting up of some kind of "Friendly Visitation Service." Sometimes this has been organised by a Council of Churches or a local minister. Others feel with reason that this "church bias" robs the service of its disinterested quality. Such visits must be "non-directive," often they are simply a means of relieving loneliness though in the end other needs may be uncovered. Where does spiritual need emerge in a situation of practical urgency? This kind of question is as old as the Gospel itself and has been the theme of debate in medical missions. Social workers who are Christians must not make undue overt reference to their beliefs. At least a client must first request help of this kind.

Sooner or later we have to ask how the minister's role in visitation or counselling differs from that of the social worker. Teachers in social administration have made detailed and helpful suggestions at this point, which require study.[8]. A minister may be expected to make more open reference to the Christian faith, and may deal with personal problems in a different way or at a different level. One approach may possibly complement the other. There are however real contradictions and confusions. Guilt, for instance, can be regarded as a morbid state of mind which is not culpable. It can also be an awareness of personal responsibility. Or again, one's attitude to death must surely depend on one's faith or philosophy. The social worker may help provide the terminal care but this may or may not imply that death is a final terminus. Or take the whole subject of healing. A Baptist Union group was much occupied with the many environmental physical and psychical factors involved. Hospital workers usually welcome the help a chaplain can give when people are low and depressed but may shy away from the idea that a minister might have something positive to contribute to the healing process in co-operation with the doctor. In all these and similar matters, so much depends on definitions. Thus McKeating in his book *Living with Guilt* describes the whole work of Christ as Healing . . . "To the first Christians" he writes, "there is no doubt that the healing work of Jesus was not merely a parable of his atoning work but an actual demonstration of it."[9]

There is room for regular consultation, such as comes out of a social workers' lunch to which voluntary societies are invited to send representatives. Questions of social ethics are often raised by the non-church members of the group. I recall for instance an argument as to when it is justifiable to invade an elderly person's independence and secure admission to a Home for his own safety. The implications of pastoral work are almost frightening in their urgency and complexity for here we are dealing with the person himself and trying to

get behind the appearance he presents or the role he plays in society.

Many social workers welcome Christian teaching and are conscious of their own need for pastoral counselling. Conversely, ministers certainly need tuition on the nature of the available social services and should not be ashamed to confess the need themselves of pastoral advice. It seems in this connection that the linking of "pastors and teachers" in the list of gifts given in Ephesians is helpful. Teachers must often take personal interest in their pupils, while social workers often spend their time in explanation and teaching. The two are certainly related in the work of the ministry. Take the example of the Baptismal class or post-Baptismal training. Looking back, one sees how much would have been gained if doctrinal teaching had been much more closely related to the day to day needs and tests of young people. In this case, too, should not the minister seek the advice more often of laymen who are in closer touch with the actual life situation of the people concerned, or nearer the age range in view. All this raises the question of priorities. There is so much a minister can do, on what should he concentrate most of his time. How are his gifts to be deployed in relation to those of other members of the church team?

We are now facing the question suggested by the title of this essay. Does the minister in these days have the time to reflect? Does he make sufficient time? My grandfather gave me a book written by James Martineau in 1896 in which he speaks of the lapse of time and the law of obligation. "Each present conviction," he writes, "each secret suggestion of duty constitutes a distinct and separate call of God, which can never be slighted without the certainty of its total departure or its fainter return."[10] Three generations later, reflecting on the variety of tasks which have come our way since ordination, we may wonder whether each pressing duty was really a call of God or a temptation from another source. Martineau also writes of "the unlanguid eye, the eager voice, the delighted assault upon a difficulty, all the indescribable language of a mind alert, a conscience quick, and spirits pure and light."[11] Such spirits would be able to distinguish duties from temptations. Ministers are driven more than most to confess the need for unhurried reflection, private prayer and devotion. Students of Wheeler Robinson will remember thankfully his advice to supplement Bible study with a devotional classic. Among those he recommended was the *Preces Privatae* of Lancelot Andrewes. Perhaps we are sometimes too shy of wearing heart on sleeve. A "retired" minister may be moved to thanksgiving for the grace of forgiveness as set out in the prayers for Thursday, where Andrewes gives thanks "for calling, recalling, further recalling manifold; for forbearance, longsuffering, long long suffering towards me, many times, many years until now."[12] But nowadays we have a wide variety of devotional books which emphasise the relation of the reflective and the active, and reveal an astonishing breadth of approach. John Woolman's remarkable *Journal* called us "to consider the advantage of living in in the real substance of religion where practice doth harmonise with

principle."[13] In our century, that most practical and determined person Simone Weil has given us the essence of her faith in the book of significant title *Waiting on God.*

Reflections on the role of the minister in the modern world may lead to the challenging conclusion that some at least may be called upon to set an example in the deliberate use of longer periods of time for reflection. Those of us who cannot do this can learn from those who pioneer in this way. But there is general agreement that every minister during his career should have special opportunities, perhaps sabbatical leave, for further study and research to determine how best he can deploy his limited resources. A more disciplined type of "fraternal" and certainly a team ministry would provide regular opportunity for the sharing of experience and the shaping of strategy.

To conclude a discursive essay, may I list some of the matters on which reflection is needed. Some have been suggested already, others there has been no space to mention.

1. The need for a Supplementary Ministry is implicit in the themes suggested here. Yet the full time ministry if it is not the noblest calling, is certainly one with great opportunities. How can the claims of ministry for life be best put before young men and women in these days?

2. All Christians are expected to relate their calling in Christ to their daily occupation. Ministers share this burden and obligation. They perhaps have more chance than most to express themselves in their work. Inner experience is reflected in preaching and pastoral work and provides to a large extent the tools and equipment for the work. But this is very demanding in terms of personal integrity and even mental health. What kind of pastoral help can he expect before and during his ministry?

3. If the minister's primary task is in relation to the Word and Sacraments, in what ways can the members of the church help him? How can a closer relationship be built up between worship and daily work. If the sermon is not to be a monologue, how can the preacher voice the highest aspirations of his working congregation and reflect a divine light of judgment upon those aspirations.[14] The latter seems sometimes to be degraded to a sort of querulous complaint about prevalent behavior which overlooks all that is good and true in our social life.

4. Assuming a major task of the minister is to "oversee" the life of the local church and to ensure the active participation of every member, what changes would this mean in the organisation of the church and in particular of the church meeting?

5. Thinking of the minister as pastor, is there a danger that in serving the needs of the afflicted and handicapped he will forget the equally important work referred to above of helping and advising the majority who are actively involved in daily affairs? In fact is the church itself coming to be looked on as an ambulance service?

6. The logic of team ministry and the appointment of specialists in such spheres as education, industry, social need seems to belittle the conception of a resident minister whose main concern is with the people and the houses round about the Manse. How can team ministry best provide for the continuance of this still essential service?

7. When a minister tries to discover what role he should fill in a local situation, he may find his training has been irrelevant or inadequate at some points. The rethinking of training by our Principals is a most hopeful sign. A man has certain gifts which are recognised when he commences training. As time goes on he discovers, and it is confirmed by others, how his gifts will best be deployed at home or overseas. Just how and when is he to receive supplementary training? Talk of in-service training is hopeful, since far more attention needs to be paid to differential provisions determined by a man's special aptitudes.

Any Christian who tries to realise solidarity both with Christ and with "all sorts and conditions of men" is bound to experience tension, even suffering. A minister is no exception. Instead of nursing his problems in isolation with all the discouragement this involves, he has today the opportunity of working as a member of the team, sharing with the people of God and helping to equip the members for efficient and effective witness, learning with them from past mistakes and taking full advantage of the present.[15]

NOTES

[1] Michael Banton, *Roles,* London, 2nd edn. 1968, p. 185.
[2] *Ibid.,* p. 157.
[3] Colin Brown, in *Ministry in the Seventies,* Ed. J. C. Porthouse, London 1970, p. II.
[4] Philip W. Withers in *The Fraternal,* No. CLXVI 1973, p. 37. See A. Gilmore (Ed.) *Ministry in Question,* London 1969.
[5] H. Kraemer, *Theology of the Laity,* London 1958.
[6] *The Shape of Ministry,* B.C.C. London, p. 28.
[7] See Symanowski, *The Christian Witness in an Industrial Society,* Gt. Britain 1964, chap. 4.
[8] See Jean S. Heywood, *Casework and Pastoral Care,* London 1967, and Kathleen Heasman, *Introduction to Pastoral Counselling,* London 1969.
[9] Henry McKeating, *Living with Guilt,* London 1970, p. 118.
[10] James Martineau, *Faith and Self Surrender,* London 1897, p. 64.
[11] *Ibid.,* p. 91.
[12] Lancelot Andrewes, *Preces Privatae,* London 1953 edn., pp. 86/87.
[13] John Woolman, *Journal,* London 1898, p. 142.
[14] See Neville Clark's essay in *Ministry in Question,* London 1971.
[15] See especially *Working Together,* report of Baptist Union Strategy Committee.

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