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Group and Team Ministries

By JOHN HEWITT

A GO-AHEAD diocesan bishop thought that a town of about 50,000 population was ideal for a group ministry. It was a distinctive area well staffed with clergy and expecting a university. So he called the incumbents together and asked them to consider the idea. This they agreed to do. Then he announced that a group was being formed. The idea started badly for two reasons. The clergy felt they were being pushed when the scheme they were considering was publicly announced as a fact. And they suspected that one of their number was already chosen as leader of the group when, left to themselves, they might have preferred someone else. The incident illustrated the difficulties of making changes in pastoral organisation, and the difficulties had little to do with the merits and drawbacks of the proposals made.

One reason which has made many suspicious of group and team ministries is the feeling that their chief object has been less the life of the parishes concerned as to economise in clergy man-power in rural areas. One rural diocese has ten percent of its parishes arranged in groups and others probably approach this proportion. The Paul report showed the contrast in clergy distribution between town and country and to form a group as benefices fall vacant is clearly one way of stopping ministerial man-power being absorbed in the countryside. But team and group ministries can be helpful almost anywhere. The one parson/one parish ideal of Theodore of Tarsus may have suited the time when we all lived on a manor and may never have left it. But the feudal system and manor have gone. Mobility of labour, the mass media and the motor car have all blurred the picture of Sir Roger and his villagers listening to their parson on Sunday morning. The population rises and the number of clergy falls. And, above all, most of us live in towns which can hardly be distinguished from each other, varying chiefly in size as they do. There is the problem of how to make the most of the clergy we have. The parochial system can turn a minister into a manager. It calls for a jack of all trades and encourages us all to think that the part of the minister in the Body of Christ is leadership in the managerial (or even the military) sense rather than ministry of word and sacrament in a biblical sense. It has encouraged clericalism.

THE AREA OF THE GROUP OR TEAM MINISTRY

What are the factors in an area which mean that a group or team ministry should be considered? First and foremost the area considered must have a social and geographical cohesion. In a small town where all the children attend the same series of Primary and Secondary schools, all the housewives use the same shopping centre and most of the men work within the area there is an ideal opportunity for the

church to work the area as one unit. Any locality where the parish boundaries go down the middle of side streets and cut through houses and gardens and are only thought of in connection with bann-calling and marriages is a place where the present parochial system is suspect. The churches are probably congregational in character rather than parochial, and in some cases will be eclectic. A guide to what the local church unit should be can be obtained roughly by asking local inhabitants where they live. Their answer will identify the social unit of which they are most conscious. A village may have a population of 500-1,000, the inhabitants will be community-conscious. There will not be a similar feeling amongst a comparable number of people in a town. The people in the town of 50,000 mentioned above would have recognised that the town was their natural unit, not the nearest big city or the county or some half-remembered village now scarcely discernible in the urban mass.

This raises the question of where is a group the suitable arrangement and where a team. A group is an association of parishes where there are still individual incumbents with freeholds. A team has a Rector with a freehold and Vicars without; it is (in theory) a more closely knit association than a group. A team with strong leadership could be very similar to a big parish with a large staff of curates. The nature of the association (i.e. the choice between group and team) should reflect the nature of the area served. In a country area where local loyalties are strong in many (but not all) villages, each village is an identifiable unit and will like to feel that it still has its own parson. There will therefore be a case for a group rather than a team (or a team under the title of a group!) Some of the villages which are not of a size to justify a full time minister may in future be wisely supplied by the ordination of a man (trained on Southwark lines?) from the congregation. The villages selected for grouping must make a coherent whole. All too often groups and pluralities have been thrown together because they were adjacent without any regard to watersheds or busy main roads. The result can be that to attend a service or meeting in another parish needs not just enthusiasm or piety but also a small tank or tractor with police escort. A road up a valley may unite five or six parishes, another 'A' road can divide an otherwise viable group. Another way of arranging country parishes is to put them in group or team with a small town. If the clergy can live in some of the country parsonages, giving the villages their parsona, they could go into the town for most of their work with the Rector. The disadvantage here is the expense of petrol consumption—particularly if the clergy wish to meet or worship together daily.

A team can be in a suburban area where there is least sense of community. There families move home more often. The man works miles away from home and both he and his wife may have their roots at the other end of the country. But suburban areas are middle class areas and the church here is as strong as it is anywhere. On special occasions as much as five or six percent of the population may attend worship in a day. It follows that few see any need for change. The clergy will point to congregations that sometimes exceed one hundred. Curates are easily paid and housed so incumbents do not complain of

isolation. However obvious a potential team or group area may seem to sociologists or bishops, the incumbents and congregations will see little need for closer working.

The down-town areas seem to be the obvious ones for teamwork. There may be little need for buildings for worship, indeed a point is reached when a tiny congregation is able to do little more than maintain its building. These areas, dockland and working class dormitory (including the new estate) may best be worked on a house church basis and the old parsona ideal recedes even further. But an incumbent with a number of curates staying from two to six years is not the answer. More continuity of relationship is needed than this and no area, rich or poor, should feel that it is only a port of call for its clergy. It may be hard to get clergy with families to stay in 'tough' areas but team members must receive salaries comparable with incumbents and be prepared to stay for long periods.

The arrangement of a group or team must vary according to the strength and character of the parishes involved. There may be a danger of parishes which are strong, because of their size (numerically or in area) or the wealth and social standing of some of its members, dominating the rest of the parishes so that we are back with an old parish church and a number of daughter churches. The bigger and more self-sufficient a parish has been, the more difficult it will be for them to realise their potential to the group or team. The opportunities and experience of the other parishes and their clergy will probably be the poorer for this, a quicker turnover in clergy will result and the advantages of the scheme lost.

The church of distinctive tradition will repay attention. The loyalty of its members is frequently strong, the more so for a sense of being regarded as an 'awkward' church. Sometimes it is eclectic in character drawing worshippers from surrounding parishes. The emphasis of its particular tradition should mean that there is now something which can be used for the benefit of the group as a whole, whether a tradition in young people's work or biblical study or social concern or lay training. If the people of the parish, represented by the P.C.C., wish to maintain the tradition that they have had, then it must be assumed that the churchmanship concerned has taken root amongst the people there. In such circumstances it would be a grave abuse of power if the authorities concerned tried to change the character of the ministry in that church. If several parishes in the proposed area were of a distinctive tradition then a proportional number of ministers of that tradition could be appointed to the staff. On the other hand if there are places where there has been a rejection or reaction against the tradition imposed by the patrons, a change could be made by a new deployment of ministers. Proposals for group and team ministries will test the real impact that the different parties of the Church of England have really made in the parishes they claim for their own. If a P.C.C. is asked to state its preferences for the next Vicar and answers in terms of age, family and musical interests it will not be unfair to assume that the people are indifferent to doctrinal interests and the content of a man's belief. If, however, there have been years of clear doctrinal instruction the result will be that the

P.C.C. will know its own mind. One probable objection from the distinctive parish is that of hearing, from their own pulpit, views contrary to their own. But no one can be protected from contrary opinions in these days of mass media and the best defence is in the thorough instruction and understanding of correct or distinctive views.

It is the little parishes, particularly in the country, which have apparently most to lose in the bigger pastoral unit. Many parishes of small population have been put in plurality with their neighbours. These have been marriages of convenience and sometimes the smaller of the partners has felt neglected. They have been at the end of the queue for everything, including the parson's attention. In a group it may be possible, as suggested above, for the parsonages of smaller parishes to be used by the clerical staff and perhaps the curates' houses of larger parishes disposed of. The more flexible arrangements possible amongst several clergy working closely together should ensure fair attention for the smallest parish. There are instances of parishes unhappy in their plurality arrangements which welcomed the coming of a group, hoping for a self-respect not obtained under the previous arrangement. The sort of parish which only has a regular congregation in single figures and may not have a regular service every Sunday can easily feel discouraged, forgotten and then resentful. They must know that they have one particular minister to look to. They must have their proper place in joint services and with visiting preachers and not just be fitted in with whoever is available.

Final points about setting up a group. There can be nothing final about the composition of a group and this should be known. As development takes place so people look to different centres of living. A new shopping centre, new schools and new towns may all cause change. Some areas will expand, others decay. A group or team area will not (or at any rate should not!) emerge instead of a certain number of parishes on a given day, it will evolve slowly as needs become clear. There is no ideal or standard size for a group, despite rumours that 'they' favour groups of ten parishes run by three clergy. But it is better to have a larger rather than a smaller unit. In fact in some areas the Rural Deanery may well be the correct area to be worked on team or group basis (the group-deanery relationship can be difficult). The more clergy involved the more chance there is that they can develop special experience and knowledge. The small unit of three or even two clergy leaves little opportunity for more than routine work.

THE STAFF OF THE GROUP OR TEAM MINISTRY

The key person in the initiation of a new ministry will be the bishop and, as the opening example may have shown, it is necessary that he should command the confidence of his clergy by tact and sincerity. Having patiently demonstrated the case for a group or team to the people of the area concerned, his most important task is to find a leader or Rector. Leadership is notoriously difficult to define (see Derek Prime's *A Christian's Guide to Leadership*) but is well worth looking for. Some bishops know no one suitable, perhaps Fenton Morley's proposals will be helpful to them. Charm, scholarship, ability to persuade and inspire, capacity for hard and business-like work, all

of these are admirable abilities desperately needed in the church, but the love of Christ and eagerness to tell people who he is and what he did must underlie them all. There is a risk that matters of churchmanship and age will be considered in choosing a leader but this should be seen as trivial. In a group he will be in charge of a parish and great caution should be exercised in choosing which one; if it is too demanding his work as a leader will suffer.

After the Rector has been found comes the selection of Vicars (or 'Staff clergy?') There seems some risk that this will be regarded as 'second curacy' type of work and that it will be difficult to keep men as Vicars if they are offered an old fashioned independent incumbency. This must be understood as wrong. Vicars in a group should be responsible for parishes and in a team should have responsibility for particular areas or churches. They will then succeed the previous clergy of the place and take up the work they left so that the advantages of group/team working can be introduced without losing any advantage bequeathed by previous independent parishes. The parishes should be able to say that they have lost nothing by the change (there will always be those who claim otherwise, but this should not be true!) The Vicars will live in the old vicarages and rectories and there will be no break in the continuity of care.

If some of the parishes involved have had curates it has to be decided what to do with them. Men doing second curacies might better be used as curates in the group or team area or replaced by a Vicar with care of a parish or area, if possible. Deacons may better remain attached to a single parish, certainly for their first year or two. But the greater variety of experience available should make groups and teams good starting points for a man's ministry and perhaps avoid some of the tensions so frequent in the usual Vicar-curate relationship.

It can also be a good idea to have in the Group or Team a man who has previously held a more responsible post but who cannot do the same quantity of work as he grows old. His experience can be valuable particularly to the Rector if their relationship develops well. But men changing their situations near retiring age are sometimes unable to settle well. They may become preoccupied with their health, long-winded or forgetful. These difficulties are no worse than those of young men entering the ministry and it is possible that group or team ministries are the best places for elderly ministers to whom the church owes so much.

There is a temptation, particularly when teams or groups are a novelty, to try and get the best men to join (the 'creaming off' process) or for those involved to think they are something rather special. Morale is important but Christian morale is based on confidence in the character and work of God and must not depend on belonging to a particular group. There has been a lot of talk about specialists and a vision is easily conjured up of fellows trained in psychiatry analysing the churchwardens while others revitalise the liturgy or win the population with relevant new theology. In practice group or team work give a flexibility which allows men to take opportunities for which time could not be found on the old one man/one parish system. One member of the group can spend more time on the hospital chap-

laincy because he has not got to worry about the magazine that another looks after, or the Industrial Chaplaincy started by a third. Youth work can have a continuity of attention and policy denied to it by a succession of curates fresh from various theological colleges—if, that is, there was any youth work before. And if a man can see that he will be doing his particular work for some years to come he will want to learn more about it, read about it and go on courses and conferences from which he will return refreshed to the benefit of his colleagues. Diocesan and civic responsibilities can be taken on. The larger the number of ministers involved the more likely it is that opportunities will be seized.

The grouped or teamed clergy can help each other in many ways. The weekly staff meeting is of great importance. The consideration in prayer and discussion of the work to be done can be a deepening and a bracing experience. Recent concern for the isolation of the clergy has encouraged social gatherings for them. But unless these have definite work in view they can degenerate in gossip-and-grumble sessions, time wasting and degrading. But under good chairmanship work will be faced and morale will be kept up without any escape in vague generalisations about our current maladies. No one should feel he is carrying his burdens alone. There should be Bible Study every week. Other studies should take a part of at least some meetings. This should be planned so as to draw on all the members' resources. Books can be obtained, read, reported upon and discussed when individuals could not all read them. At the meeting mutual help can be arranged for visiting, taking meetings or services. Preaching should be planned so that each minister has between 50% and 75% of his preaching at his own church, and the other services in another so that congregations get variety without getting to the point of feeling that they see too little of their own man. There should be courses of addresses. An expert could take a series in his speciality or the team could each take one topic in a series. One group found that on Sunday evening during winter, when country churches have Evening Prayer in the afternoon, they had six clergy to take three services at 6.30 p.m. So four of them would attend one church and, while one preached, three could take notes. At the next staff meeting they could then comment under agreed headings (content, construction and delivery). As a result of this sort of concern an indifferent preacher might be encouraged to attend a College of Preachers course.

Readers of Bruce Kendrick's *Come Out The Wilderness* will know what the trap is here. The Harlem Team Ministry found that clericalism was their occupational hazard. The clergy can have, and will enjoy, their weekly meetings held, no doubt, in the mornings. But they become a very exclusive club. Decisions will be taken there and sometimes important decisions will seem so urgent that no laity will be consulted (e.g. financial decisions taken without discussion with PCC treasurers let alone PCCs). The laity will not mind that if they think that 'results' (e.g. increased congregations) are likely in the not-too-long-run. But this only encourages clericalism more. And if 'results' do not arrive, there will be bitterness and disillusionment. Groups and teams must bring closer the reality of Christ's body as

one *laos*, not drive it further away. Somehow final authority must lie with a fully representative group or council. Time is the enemy here. The most suitable people are always the most deeply committed. The test of a group or team ministry is the extent to which it helps the ordinary Christian to be a more effective Christian.

The ultimate failure is that of the leader of an early group who was asked 'What does this group mean to the lay people?' He paused and then answered, 'It means that they know that they have three parsons and a bus'.

THE WORKING OF THE GROUP OR TEAM MINISTRY

This brings us to the point of considering the relationships of congregations with each other. Until this point is reached no one should claim that a group or team ministry has started. Many, perhaps most, churchpeople have little idea of their next parish's church life and have few friends in other congregations. Group services are desirable; it does morale good to be amongst (or to preach to) a big congregation for a change. If this can be followed with a cup of tea the members of the different congregations may try and get to know each other. But few of us are good mixers or ice-breakers and after a few times the novelty may wear off. The more parochially minded will 'take the evening off' when the group service is held at another church—and then point out that the combined congregation is less than the separate ones.

The essential step is to get people into small groups of between six and a dozen. This is what is sometimes called the 'primary' group in which a number of people can overcome their shyness on an informal basis. One can attempt a conference with as many as possible attending—certainly wardens and PCC members. Then the conference can be broken into parochially mixed groups to discuss questions of Christian life leading on to the work of the church. Then it may be seen that the churchpeople previously working separately may be wiser to do some things together. There may be a general desire to 'do something' and the clergy (having kept out of the groups) should resist the overwhelming desire to rush in with their ideas. The laity should be asked to isolate the matters they are prepared to discuss and actually act upon. If the clergy dominate, it becomes difficult to encourage lay responsibility. To use group work jargon, they are there as 'resource' members, to provide the knowledge they are trained in.

One of the biggest factors in the parochial or congregational mentality is the possession of particular buildings. It is an ecumenical truism that investment in buildings brings institutional conservatism in its wake. This holds good both within denominations and between them. It is said that if St. Paul had converted the Galatians and the Corinthians to Anglicanism their first actions would have been to write off to Jerusalem for a minister of the highest qualifications and set up a building fund. Try closing a building where a tiny and, perhaps, elderly group worship and, as Free Churchmen have found in some areas, they will show a tremendous tenacity which bears little relation to local needs for the Gospel. But if people can be persuaded

to meet in small groups in each other's houses, a hopeful avenue is opened. In urban areas where parish boundaries are often meaningless the congregation probably overlap residentially, and if they will have house meetings those meetings have the potential of street or neighbourhood cells. The opportunity should be taken to join with other denominations as far as possible. If parts of the church are going to grow together it may as well be as many parts as possible. If we are going to break down inter-parochial barriers and misunderstandings, we may as well start on the inter-denominational barriers while we are at it. The only people who need to be afraid of this approach are those who lack confidence in their convictions and yet in the long run such people have the most to gain. It can be hoped that one of the chief results of intimate groups is that people will wish to learn more deeply about the faith they claim. Then it is the clergy who are able to provide the knowledge and meet the need which so often goes unexpressed and even unrealised in the individual churchman.

It is true that in the early stages there may be a tendency to keep away from the doctrinal issues. But as people in groups get to know each other they will relax and be frank with each other. Then an earlier tendency to paper over the cracks and suspect enthusiasm, whether from 'high church' or 'bible punchers', can be replaced by genuine searching and study. The group that meets in a house can develop into having a concern for lonely and needy neighbours and end by making a real missionary impact. All this will need tact and unobtrusive leadership from the clergy. Old fashioned clericalism can stifle initiative. One Vicar was very upset when a member of his congregation asked him for permission to have a prayer group in her home. But he learned something about the clerical image.

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For many people the great issue in group and team work is that of churchmanship. Members of the Church of England are presumably prepared to work with those of different opinions to themselves; if they were not they would hardly remain in the Church of England. But many suspect that there is a consistent effort on the part of the authorities to press the Church into a 'central churchmanship' mould. How far this is justified most of us will never know. But parishes which join group or team ministries appear to have no guarantee about the continuity of their tradition of ministry as they may previously have had with a patronage trust. The Fenton Morley report has claimed that the hands of the local congregation will be strengthened if its proposals are implemented. This may or may not be. But, as Martin Parsons in *Evangelicals and Patronage* states, it is difficult to imagine that the appointments of a Diocesan Ministry Commission will differ from those of the bishop as an individual. It is not necessary to doubt any individual's sincerity or piety to see the risks involved. Under the old patronage system some parishes had a continuity of tradition which many others envied. But in groups and teams appointments will be made from those who are known to the bishop concerned and, presumably, have his confidence. The Evangelical parishioners will wonder if they will continue to have at

their parsonage, or amongst those serving them, a man whose convictions are biblically based and who believes in the need for men to be born again. The Anglo-Catholics may doubt whether they will continue to have a priest trained to offer worship in their tradition or experienced as a director of souls in the confessional. Obviously bishops (or Diocesan Ministry Commissions) cannot appoint men they have no knowledge of. Nor can one imagine a bishop writing round all the various trusts asking for suitable names. There is a need for a body like the Evangelical Patronage Consultative Council to be able to suggest suitable men to those who ought to be appointing Evangelicals to vacancies.

Perhaps it will be difficult to persuade men of these theological convictions to accept work in group and team ministries. Inevitably it will be thought that pressure will be brought on ministers to compromise their convictions in some way. It ought never to happen in practice but the possibility cannot be ruled out. But it is to be hoped that men will be prepared to risk something for the sake of the Gospel. Some go to churches that usually have vestments worn, and wear them for the sake of being able to preach a biblically based word where otherwise it may not be heard. In any event the new groups and teams *must be seen as an opportunity*. Parishes which have not heard a definite authoritative biblical message for years may now be reached. The emphasis that Evangelicals have placed on work amongst young people may mean that organisations like Pathfinders can draw on the young people of several parishes to the benefit of church life in the area. The contribution that Evangelicals can make to a group magazine may enliven it and reach hundreds of homes with a fresh angle on the appeal of the Church. Less obviously but in the long run of great importance is the influence that the Evangelical minister can have when theological issues are raised amongst the clergy privately or at staff meetings. Too many clergy have out-of-date, second-hand notions of what Evangelicalism stands for. Also the theological expertise of Anglican clergy can be overrated and the contribution of a man well-trained in biblical thought can have positive impact amongst those who have found little help in much current theological discussion at university or in some ministerial circles.

It is claimed that Evangelicals are moving into the positions of being the leaders or pacemakers in the Church of England. If this is true, there is no need for any isolationism. Even in areas where there has not been for a long time an Evangelical witness there should be a willingness to go and help. 'An Evangelical in every group and team' would be a good slogan both for parishes asked to consider a new local arrangement and for ministers offered a place on the staff of the group or team.