

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Called To Be One : Reconciliation In Ministry

David Carter, 1995

The reconciliation of differing concepts of ministry continues to be one of the most intractable problems in ecumenism. Not surprisingly, it has been identified as a key area for enquiry by the *Called To Be One* ecclesiology process of Churches Together in England. In the hope of assisting that process, I offer this paper, which arises out of the stimulus provided by the provisional responses of the churches as collated by Canon Alan Dawkins (in 1995; the report was finally published in 1996). I have tried to relate some of this material to insights that I have gleaned from my membership of a Methodist working party on ecclesiology and elsewhere.

It is clear that the process of convergence, while promising in some areas is still fraught with many fears. Roman Catholics and Orthodox, in the main, are still concerned that their traditional understanding of the ordained ministry as unique within the Church are not purely derivative from the general ministry of the whole people of God should not be imperiled. At the other end of the spectrum, some Free Churches are concerned that the ordained ministry should not be divorced from the authority of the whole body, and that no quarter be given to and concept of the ordained ministry that might be seen as authoritarian. We have to see what can be done to effect reconciliation while calming such fears.

The statement 'all churches want to see ministry in the context of the calling of the whole people of God' provides an encouraging starting point. It indicates that we are all agreed on one essential: that ministry derives its meaning from the total context of the call of the Church, and exists to enable the corporate mission. We would presumably all agree that Paul's statement in Ephesians about 'equipping the saints for the work of ministry' is crucial here. The ordained ministry, in whatever form we have it, exists to enable the ministry of the whole body. It is up to all of us to sharpen

up our statements of how our particular form of ordained ministry does that; also to examine how our actual practice of ministry allows it to happen.

It is, I think, in this context, that we need to see the vexed questions of representativeness, i.e. whether we see the ministry as representing the people, or Christ to the people, and the question of ministerial priesthood and its relationship to that of the 'priesthood of all believers'. We are all agreed that there is only one priesthood in the New Covenant, that of Christ himself. We are also agreed that, through baptismal incorporation into Christ the entire body of believers is constituted as a corporate 'royal priesthood', although that priesthood is, of course, strictly derivative from and dependent on that of Christ. We would agree that as a result of our adoption as sons and daughters in the Son, we all as individuals have 'access through the Spirit to the one Father'. However, none of us would see Christian discipleship as a matter of individual call or response in isolation from the call of the whole people of God. Protestants would see the direct relationship of the individual Christian with God in Christ as a fundamental principle re-emphasised at the Reformation. I do not think that modern Roman Catholics would wish to gainsay this. Most, but not perhaps all, Protestants would accept, however, that this does not mean that 'everyone can do anything'. We all have our concepts of Church order; and although some Free Church people may assert that any lay person can be authorised, at least temporarily, to carry out any of the normal functions of the ordained ministry, including that of Eucharistic presidency, they would accept that this has to be authorised at some level in the Church. At what level, is a proper topic for ecclesial debate amongst us in this process. CTE contains churches that believe that such decisions can only be made at the Universal level, churches that believe that such decisions can be made at the national or provincial level (these include Anglicans and Methodists who have admitted women to presbyteral ministry in a piecemeal process, province by province, or Conference by Conference, that, in the Anglican Communion, is still incomplete) and churches, such as Baptists and Congregationalists, who believe that all matters of order are strictly a matter for the local congregation alone.

Can we talk of a 'ministerial' exercise of those who exercise presbyteral or episcopal ministry amongst us without grating on Free Church sensitivities and without denying their understanding of the 'priesthood of all believers' and creating fear of a ministry which is above the people rather than a service in their midst? I believe we can so speak, when we start from the point of pastoral and representative ministry for which special charisms are given. We all agree that the ordained ministry is pastoral in nature and we all accept that pastoral care is not the exclusive work of the ordained ministry. But we do agree that ordained ministers in all our polities have a key role of leadership in this respect, and also in pioneering leadership in mission. Pastoral ministry involves a very real element of consecration and sacrifice, as is shown in our Lord's post-Resurrection charges to Peter; therefore it is appropriate, in some sense, to talk of it as priestly, though the priestliness here spoken of is closely related to that of the whole people of God of which Paul speaks in Romans 12. We might say it is oriented to it, as the Methodist statement on Ordination of 1974 does, when it talks of 'ordination as a perpetual reminder of the calling of the whole people of God' and of the ordained ministry as 'the sign of the presence of the ministry of Christ in the Church and through it to the world'. The Methodist statement seems to offer a way round the function/being dilemma; indeed this was in the mind of the Conference in 1974 when it said it wished to avoid such labels and to see ordination in the context of the whole ministry of the people of God. The minister is both a sign and a functioning person. He or she is to be seen simultaneously in the context of the ministry and priesthood of the whole people of God, and yet within the context of special provision for leadership and equipping of the Church that means that his pastoral ministry can legitimately be said, as ARCIC does, 'to belong to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit'. As so often, there is a paradox to be held in tension here, and one that has not been easily accommodated in many traditional theologies.

Methodism has made much in recent years of the concept of the minister as 'representative person', and to this extent Canon Dawkins' remark about Free Church reservations about this concept does not

hold good in respect of the what is the largest Free Church, however true it may be of other Free Churches. It is good to see that the concept is seen as helpful by Roman Catholics. It is true there can be ambiguity as to what it means. Does it mean that the minister represents his or her people, or Christ to them? I think again both ideas have to be held in tension. Ministers can only come from among the laity. They are chosen from it and, historically in the early Church, and still in most Protestant churches, there is very close lay involvement in deciding who is recommended for ordination, even though the latter is exclusively carried out by other ministers. I think we all agree that there should be such lay involvement. However, the minister *qua* minister is brought into a special relationship with Christ through the fact that he or she carries out so many of the functions of the Risen Christ within his Church, the three main ones being acting as under-pastor to the Shepherd (cf I Peter 5, and being minister of his word and of his sacraments. Even in churches where all these functions may be shared with one or more lay persons locally, the minister still has a special representative and focussing function, representing the wider Church to the local church, as a person who is charged with mediating in some sense the catholicity of the whole to the local community through keeping it in touch with the wider body (this is emphasized as a function of the URC ministry; it is certainly part of the Methodist, Anglican and Roman Catholic understanding). To talk of the minister as having these special functions is not to talk of the minister as being 'above' the church; he or she is always the servant and acts in concert with the body. It is useful here to reflect on the emphasis that Jean Tillard has put on the bishop as being chosen in and by the local church as one in whom it recognises faithfulness to its own apostolicity - and yet becoming, as the result of his ordination by episcopal representatives of the 'wider' Church, a link person across time and space with the rest of the Church Universal.

Perhaps the understanding of the ordained minister as the person acting in concert with his or her own 'local' church and the rest of the Church is the clue we need to unlock the problem. The Church is a communion of love; it should exist, according to Paul, in a spirit of 'preferring one another in honour'. Theologies that too clearly try to define the ordained ministry as being 'above' or 'below' the laity distance themselves from the paradoxes involved in this mystery. The partnership of lay people and their pastors should perhaps accord with the model of the relationship of the Father and the Son, as John presents it. We all know that Ignatius of Antioch compared the authority of the bishop with that of the Father and exhorted everyone to obey the bishop as Jesus obeyed the Father. Ignatius did not complete the equation by showing how the Father, in John's thought, committed all things into the hands of the Son. There is a profound relationship of mutuality involved here. Ministry should involve mutual respect, of pastors by their lay people and of lay people by their pastors. This should be embodied as far as possible in our church courts and decision-making structures. There is a challenge to all churches both to think theologically about ministry in the light of a *koinonia* ecclesiology and to reassess their actual practice of it. I am taken with the suggestions at Porvoo (the 1992 Anglican-Baltic Lutheran Agreement), at Santiago (the 1993 Faith and Order Commission meeting) and in the (1993) Anglican-Methodist Interim Report, that we should look at what degree of participation is possible in each others' ordinations, not as a way of catching a particular succession which we did not have before, but as a way of expressing recognition and *koinonia* and willingness to enter into a fuller heritage. This would be done in the mutual spirit of 'a common quest for a new and deeper realization of the unity which the Lord will and gives to his Church' (Response from the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, paragraph 21 – released in 1996).