**CHANGING PATTERNS OF MINISTRY POST-PANDEMIC**

**Birmingham District Presbyteral Synod 18 March 2021**

I want to begin with the question of what we might be afraid of, worried, or concerned about with regard to our ministry when lockdown restrictions start to be lifted. I am very grateful for the responses that I have received to my preliminary question about this. Here is a collated list of what I have heard both directly and indirectly.

**Concerns about our ministry post-pandemic**

* People may not return to ‘physical’ church (worship/fellowship/activity/financial commitment etc) and may not developing further any ‘virtual’ participation they have begun.
* People may not return to the jobs they were doing or take up other jobs that need doing.
* Church’s income from congregations, letting of premises to community groups etc may plummet.
* Presbyters may be forced to become more like managers of officers or paid employees in order to ensure that essential requirements re safeguarding, GDPR, property, finance etc fulfilled
* Presbyters may have to become Do-It-Alls because there is no one else to do things.
* Circuits and Connexion may no longer able to support manses and stipends, leading to stationing crises.
* Pressure on pension provision (or of pension provision on connexional finances).
* We may lose the freedom we have enjoyed in the pandemic: we are not sure we want to go back to ministry as it was before it.
* Connexion may not deliver its side of covenant relationship in terms of support, stipend, housing, pension etc for presbyters.

The first thing I want to do is acknowledge the honesty and reality of those fears and concerns. They stem from real issues, not fantasies. I shall try to address all of them, at least obliquely and however briefly, in what I am about to say. I shall also try to focus on how any shape of a post-pandemic church affects the future patterns of presbyteral ministry.

Let us begin by looking at some basic Models of Church and think about which Models of Ministry they tend to lean towards. Each Church and Presbyter of course is a mixture of more than one, but it helps to distinguish the various strands.

The first five models of church in the following list are taken from the work of Avery Dulles some years ago now. The others are a variety of more recent suggestions. The “field hospital” is a favourite of Pope Francis.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Church as….** | **tends towards…** | **Presbyter as….** |
| *Institution* |  | *Manager or Power-broker* |
| *Mystical Communion* |  | *Holy Person* and/or  *Centre of the Church Community* |
| *Sacrament* |  | *Sacramental sign* |
| *Herald* |  | *Preacher/Prophet/Proclaimer* |
| *Servant* |  | *Enabler* |
| *Club or Extended Family* |  | *???* |
| *Service Station or Supermarket* |  | *???* |
| *Lifeboat Station* |  | *???* |
| *Field Hospital* |  | *???* |
| *Outpost for prayer & worship; Outlet for God’s love & grace* |  | *???* |
| *Community of followers of Jesus* |  | *???* |
| *Community of openly broken people, open to be raised to life* |  | *???* |

You might like to think about which models of Presbyter fit best in the right hand column, particularly with regard to the ones I have left blank.

We need to recognise that our Models of Church and Models of Ministry interact symbiotically, sometimes healthily and sometimes not. So it is worth thinking about which models of ministry and models of church are likely to be antithetical or even damaging to each other.

When we do that, I believe that two general principles emerge:

1. It is unhealthy and damaging if local churches compel presbyters to serve only those churches’ perceived needs and agendas.
2. It is equally unhealthy and damaging if presbyters seek only to make local churches in the image of their own passions and agendas.

What is needed is a constructive dialogue between the gifts and needs of the presbyter on the one hand, and on the other the gifts and needs of the particular churches or other situations which the presbyter serves. That involves recognising the complementarity of all ministries, lay and ordained. It also involves recognising the variety in presbyters’ circumstances. That, of course, is not the same as presbyters being able to say “I want, I get” to the Church. But when the Conference abolished the separate category of Minister in Local Appointment (and I know, because I presented those resolutions), it was part of a programme of *Releasing Ministers for Ministry.* The intention was to increase the flexibility of presbyteral ministry, so that it could be full-time or part-time, stipendiary or non-stipendiary, requiring them to live in a manse or not. But the need to fill traditional appointments on the stations crushed that intention. Somehow we need to revisit all that. I wish the groups grappling with the current project on Changing Patterns of Ministry all the best!

We are coming to a time of return and restoration – or should that better be renewal? I have found myself becoming increasingly fascinated by the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah. They have a lot of parallels with our situation. They demonstrate the difficulty of discerning what God is doing in the mess of particular circumstances, when whatever it might be is being disclosed piecemeal in apparently separate events over a period of time. You can see attempts in the texts to evaluate and synthesise, and create an overarching narrative – and they are not fully successful! It was a time when there were different communities with different perspectives coming from their various experiences. There were those who had been dragged into a new and strange experience in exile and now had to return to the old places. There were those who had chosen or been forced to stay in the old places and make the best of things (which had led some to making various accommodations to surrounding culture). There were others who were outsiders who resented anything being restored by the people of God at all. Each group was vying for its own viewpoint. It all raised a vexed question of where true leadership was to be found. Moreover, all of it, of course, was in the context of secular – in this case imperial - powers which dominated the scene, but still gave some room for manoeuvre, and so needed to be "played" by the leaders of the people of God.

Into this come Ezra and Nehemiah, a priest and a governor. In our terms, it is ordained and lay working collaboratively in complementary ways. They realise that first of all they need to to create a place where people can feel safe and re-establish their identity. In the story, they first have to cart out the rubbish from the destroyed edifices littering the place (in their case, Jerusalem) . Now there’s a task in which we have to help lead our people! Then they have to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Yes, I know that Trey Hall has rightly told us that we need to be a Church Without Walls, but as the book of Ecclesiastes has it, there is a time to break down and a time to build up. What we need to ensure is that anything we do to create a safe space for people that will help to build them up is not a barrier but something through which we and others can pass easily in and out. To use a New Testament image, we need a sheepfold from which the sheep (including those currently outside or lost to the flock) may go out to graze in the world outside and to which they may return for safety.

Ezra and Nehemiah also realise that the centring of the community on God needs to be re-established. That to me is our overarching task. It is urgent; and, to be honest, I am not sure that we have paid it adequate attention in the recent past, so we are short of thinking and skills. For Ezra and Nehemiah it leads to an emphasis on prayer and worship that is adapted to the new situation. It also means that the covenant with God needs to be renewed, which in turn means that the scriptures need to be read again and heard afresh. That does not mean that you have to take everything in the texts uncritically. In trying to re-connect with previous renewals of the people of God, Ezra and Nehemiah are drawn towards accepting uncritically the injunctions and practices against the cultures they encountered when they came into Canaan from Egypt, particularly with regard to inter-marriage, and attitudes to women and foreigners. We need to be critical of such things, not least on the grounds of the biblical traditions of inclusion rather than exclusion that stretch from Isaiah to the New Testament. Maybe what we need to be reconnecting with and re-expressing is the “Tabernacling” model of the people of God rather than the “Temple-ing” one. That would be close to our Methodist origins, if not necessarily our more recent practice. Nevertheless, dissenting from one aspect of a text ought not to lead to us ignoring all the other aspects of that text. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves tell us that the old texts have to be read with interpretation for new times – true biblical literacy!

So where does all this leave us as presbyters? We need to help ourselves and others to reconnect with things pre-pandemic, and yet at the same time not become trapped by them. When we took the pews out at Solihull, we tried to help people accept it by getting them to think of people who had sat in them in the past, then write those people’s names on a post-it note and stick it on the pew where they remembered them sitting. We then collected the notes and when we dedicated the refurbished pew-less church, we presented them transcribed into a book as a way of transferring the memories into a new context.

We need to do new things that are in continuity with the old. In a sense we need to fulfil our old purposes in new ways. If you want to know what those purposes are, look at the ordinal or the recent Faith and Order statement on *Ministry in the Methodist Church* which is due to come back to this year’s Conference. We need to help each other to re-imagine how they might be embodied in the new circumstances.

For the moment, I just want to take as an example the three marks of Presbyteral Ministry which we articulated in this form a couple of decades ago. It is a Ministry of the Word. The Word is God speaking to us, creating new life in us, bringing new things to birth through us. The major lens which focusses that for us and through which it happens is the Bible. So the Bible is of crucial importance. Too often though it is turned into an idol rather than an icon, or read through dark glasses and heard with cloth ears. We need to reimagine the ways in which we treat it, both for those returning who have become deadened to it, and those new people who are not familiar with it.

It is a Ministry of Sacrament. In general, worship is of paramount importance. The task of a presbyter is to be able to lead all the people in worship, including those whose personality or experience means that they worship in different ways to the presbyter’s own preferences. That task now widens out to include worshipping in new forms and ways post-pandemic. There has been a whole explosion of creativity about on-line worship, and some remarkable things have been achieved which we must continue. My only problem is that that worship is often like watching a film rather than being in a theatre or concert hall. In the former the audience cannot affect the performance. In the latter they can and do. Gathered ‘physical’ worship is like the latter. How do we bring that element of engagement into the former? How do we ensure that worship is sacramental, with grace and love being received and returned? In particular, how do we reimagine Baptism so that it enables entry into the Church in these new circumstances? How do we enable people to commune in Communion, to share the one body and become the one body in virtual reality as well as physical reality?

Finally, Presbyteral Ministry is a ministry of Pastoral Responsibility. This too is of paramount importance. We need to remember that in all things pastoral responsibility and oversight are fundamentally shared between those who are lay and those who are ordained. But pastoral responsibility also includes pastoral care. We have started but need to go on rethinking how we ensure that everyone is cared for when physical meeting or encounter is no longer the first or even the main means of keeping contact with people. But pastoral responsibility and oversight also involves watching over God’s people in love (and allowing the Church to watch over us in the same way). So how do we do that if people no longer meet and communicate solely or primarily in the old ways? We need to work out new ways of embodying it in the new circumstances.

Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Responsibility. They are the core of our calling. We need to reimagine them all to enable

* the people of God to gather round the Word of God, sharing their insights into the gospel to discover the Holy Spirit’s insight amongst the people;
* the people of the Lord to gather round the table of the Lord, sharing their lives in order to receive the life of Jesus and becomes his body in the world;
* the people of the Spirit to gather round the gifts of the Spirit, giving and receiving them so all may flourish.

Ken Howcroft

18 March 2021

*Revised* 19 March 2021

*I am grateful for scholarly help on Ezra and Nehemiah from the Revd. David R Wood (now a supernumerary minister in Richmond, Yorkshire). For anyone interested, there will be an article by him on the relevance to today of Ezra and Nehemiah in his book* **More Neglected Nuggets of the Old Testament** *due to be published later this year. His contact details are in the Minutes of Conference.*