

Local Ministry in the New Testament

The Church of England is an 'episcopal' Church. It embraces what is known as the 'three-fold' order of ministry, consisting of what are now known as bishops, priests and deacons. Like the Roman Catholic Church, it sees this pattern of ministry already emerging in New Testament times and its authority descending from the apostles. However, in both Churches, the three-fold order of ministry is under strain. Like the Roman Catholics, the Church of England faces an increasingly acute shortage of priests. Nor is the diaconate a separate order of ministry, but a stage of preparation, usually lasting no more than a year, before ordination to the priesthood.

Today, the Church is actively engaged in promoting new patterns of ministry, recognising and making use of the gifts of lay people as well as the ordained, and locally rather than nationally authorised. In Lichfield Diocese as well as the ministry of reader, which has been in existence for over 100 years, people are trained as pastoral carers, prayer guides, evangelists and so on. Moreover, the emphasis in our training is on collaborative working, with lay and ordained working together and recognising the unique contribution each can make. How do these new patterns fit with the tradition of the Church and the witness of the New Testament? From where do these local ministries derive their authority?

Local ministry in the New Testament

In the New Testament the primary ministry is that of the apostles. First of all the Twelve were chosen by Jesus and commissioned as his witnesses to preach the gospel to all nations. The Church came to birth as a result of their witness and, from the very first, the apostles' teaching was seen as foundational to the Church's existence (see for example Acts 2:42, 6:2). However, the Twelve were not to remain the only apostles or founders of churches. Before very long the 'Seven', who were appointed to oversee the Greek-speaking congregations on Jerusalem, were founding churches as far afield as Samaria and Syria (Acts 8:4-8, 11:19-21). Later, Paul was commissioned by Jesus himself to take the Gospel to the Gentiles and became an apostolic founder of churches. Apostleship did not for long remain the property of the few who were appointed by Jesus. Others were gifted by the Holy Spirit for the task of witnessing and founding new churches. In this situation, what was seen as of overriding importance was that the truth of the apostolic teaching should be maintained, that every church should be seen to rest on the teaching of the apostles (see for example Galatians 2:1-2, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, 1 Timothy 3:15).

Thus each of the churches springing up around the Mediterranean derived its authenticity from its apostolic foundation and its relationship to the apostles' teaching. What of ministry *within* those churches? Here two principles can be seen to apply. First of all, ministry is part and parcel of the being of the Church. Wherever God through the Holy Spirit calls people together to worship and serve Jesus as

Lord, there is ministry. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul is writing a matter of months after the founding of the Church. He urges the Christians to, "Respect those who labour among [them], and have charge of [them] in the Lord and admonish [them]" (1 Thessalonians 5:12). These people are not given any specific title and, moreover, only two verses later the whole community is urged to, "Admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them ..." On the one hand, ministry is the function of the whole community; on the other, there can be expected to be people who will emerge with the gifts and character both to care for the members and to exercise discipline ('admonish'). Paul, however, had not appointed these people, at least not at this stage. In Acts 14:23, we are told that he did appoint elders in the churches of Galatia, but only on his second visit. In the churches at Corinth and at Rome, he clearly expected ministry to be based on charismatic gifting (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Romans 12:3-8). These New Testament passages, then, give a picture of ministry and the authority of ministry emerging 'from below', that is, from within the congregation.

On the other hand, the ministry of the local churches was increasingly regularised and given authority by the wider Church. Luke, the author of Acts, is noted for his precision in the use of titles for secular authorities ('magistrates' in Philippi, 'proconsuls' in Ephesus, Acts 16:35, 19:38). He records the leadership of the church in Antioch consisting of 'prophets' and 'teachers' (Acts 13:1), but that of Jerusalem consisting of the 'apostles' and 'elders' (Acts 15:6). He also says that there were 'elders' in Galatia and in Ephesus (Acts 14:23, 20:17) 1 Timothy 4:14 talks of Timothy having been appointed through prophecy and by the laying on of hands of the council of elders. The Greek for elder is *presbyteros*; later, in the second century, the elder or presbyter came to be referred to as 'priest'. Here, then, is a picture of ministry and its authority being given 'from above', through the recognition of the wider Church.

The most important witness in this respect is the 'Pastoral Epistles' – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Many scholars believe that these letters were not written by Paul but by his successors, following a practice that was already widespread in the ancient world of ascribing authorship to another, usually well-known, person. If these scholars are right, this practice attests the concern of the second generation of church leaders to preserve the authority of the apostles and the basis of Christian *koinonia* or fellowship in the apostles' teaching. They would see themselves as making explicit what they believed the apostolic tradition to be. In the Pastorals, Timothy and Titus are shown being commissioned by Paul to bring order to two unruly churches. They are to do this by upholding the standard of truth inherited from the apostles, by making sure that the behaviour of church members conforms to Christian teaching and by appointing leaders who can be relied on to teach these truths and uphold this discipline. Thus, the motivation behind the regularisation of ministry was the preservation of both truth and discipline.

Ministry and conflict

The New Testament, therefore, presents us with a witness to both authority 'from below', in the form of ministry authenticated by the presence and grace of the Holy

Spirit; and authority 'from above', in the form of the regularisation of ministry by appointments in succession to and with the authority of the apostles. It also documents at length the problems thrown up by the need for authority in the Church. At Corinth, Apollos was first encouraged by Paul and his trusted fellow-workers Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:24-28), but later his teaching helped to cause division (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). Later still, Paul strenuously opposed a group of rival apostles from Jerusalem, who, he felt, were undermining both his authority and his teaching at Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:1 – 12:18). In 1 Timothy, Timothy is told to turn out the trouble-makers Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19-20). In 3 John the 'elder' writes of Diotrophes, who refuses to acknowledge his authority and has closed the church to his associates (3 John 9-10). Neither authority 'from below' nor 'from above' provided the answer to the power struggles of the early Church. They were caused by the age-old tendencies of Christians to 'put themselves first' (3 John 9), to want to be served rather than to serve (Mark 10:45). The answer was and is to be found not in a secure pattern of ministerial authority but in the love and servanthood which is the authentic mark of Christlikeness (1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 1:27 – 2:8).

In the light of this brief survey of the New Testament, it can be seen that neither the formation of new patterns of ministry nor the adaptation of old patterns for a new situation is new. It is something that the Church has had to do at all stages of its history. Local ministry is not something of lesser importance than the historical three-fold ministry of the Church. It is emerging, as all ministry does, as the gift of Christ through his Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Ephesians 4:11). The authority of local ministry is partly 'from below', in the form of the equipping of the Holy Spirit, and partly 'from above', in the form of the recognition by the Church of some specific calling. As always, these two forms of authority co-exist side by side. This pattern of authority is not without its problems, but the solution is a commitment to following the example of Jesus.

Further Reading:

Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change*, SCM 1980

C.K.Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament*, Paternoster, 1985.