

Warminster July 2011: Continuity and Change in theological education

In attempting to say something useful on Ordination Training in the 21st century, I think it is important to reflect on elements of continuity and change from the last century. Now more than forty years ago, my theological college was, like yours no doubt, mostly youthful, male, and post-graduate, not to mention properly residential! College staff knew what kind of ministry we would all enter: namely their own, as they had practised it themselves in parishes some years earlier. The world is different now.

A mother camel and a baby camel were talking one day. The baby asked, "Why do we have these huge three-toed feet?" The mother explained, "Well, when we trek across the desert, our toes will help us stay on top of the soft sand". Then the baby asked, "Mum, why do we have these long eyelashes?" "They are there to keep the sand out of our eyes on the trips through the desert" said the mother. "And why have we got these great big humps on our backs?" "Well, they are there to store water for our long treks across the desert, so we can go on without drinking for long periods". "So, we have huge feet so that we don't sink, long eye lashes to keep the sand out of our eyes, and these humps to store water?" "Yes, dear". "So what are we doing in London Zoo?"

Many of our generation were not well equipped for rapid evolutionary development, and now sometimes feel trapped in a cage of other peoples' or other generations' expectations. After 40 years of priesthood, and 30 years of teaching, I have come to feel our churches need a deeper commitment to one primary task - *providing the church with its theologians*.

Ordinands I taught during the last 30 years were mostly older than me, half of them women, and the contexts in which they set out to fulfil their priesthood so much broader, not confined to the interior life of churches but set in a wide range of working and professional contexts. Latterly, however, this outward-looking mission emphasis has begun to turn in on itself as the mainstream churches panic about declining numbers and influence. That term 'mission' is still in popular vogue, but drawn as it is from commercial business practice it no longer seems to mean or imply a genuine outwardly developing movement but only a concentration on the attractiveness and accessibility of the church product. To use liturgical terminology, gathering seems to take precedence over sending. As a result, theological educators are being drawn away from their primary task – *providing the church with its theologians*.

Theology is the life-blood of the church and the Christian way, but is now widely derided and seen as irrelevant not only in society generally but also in relation to the daily tasks of the ordained. There is failure here, and we need to ask again what theological education is *for*. In my view, it is for priesthood - a concept that I believe retains powerful resonance both in our own culture and in other religious traditions.

Training priests as theologians

What kind of theologian is the ordained priest? Theology belongs to the whole church, not just to clergy. One of our worst mistakes has been to restrict theological education to clergy. Despite recent developments in expanding diocesan provision for adult learning, financial provision remains skewed in favour of ordination training. It sustains inherited clericalism, narrows the scope of theology, and limits understanding of what it means to be Christian to ecclesiastical culture rather than engagement with the world. Learning theology needs to begin from and be rooted in *the life of the whole church in the world*. I tried as best I could during my years with NEOC to build a properly ecumenical establishment that would be able to include in a wider student body alongside ordinands and student ministers, lay adult learners ‘off the street’ who wished to study theology for its own sake, and so help diminish the tendency for some ordinands to view their training only as a necessary hoop to jump through in order to achieve ordained status. The level of fees, of course, militated against this policy, and those who took advantage of it were mostly gay refugees from the Methodist and Anglican churches who were training in the Metropolitan Community Church. I could have lost my job over this, of course, but they helped us to take seriously the listening process commended by the 1998 Lambeth Conference. For this reason among others, especially in a troubled church like ours, theology is a truly controversial subject!

In a troubled church, theology is controversial

I believe that the significant point and purpose of priesthood is to be the bearer of the church’s theology, which is why priesthood must also find its roots in *the life of the whole church in the world*. But the church is at war with itself on several fronts, all of which concern the way in which the church relates to the culture in which it is set. The current battle lines can be discerned clearly when the church asks about suitability for ordination. Does it depend on orthodoxy of ideas and beliefs? On marital status or sexual preference? On attitudes to minorities who refuse recognition to those with whom they disagree? In a church asking those kinds of questions, there is a lot of untidiness and uncertainty around. Sometimes we find it difficult and painful to live with one another.

This is not the only issue. Much of our current uncertainty is being prompted by diminishing clergy numbers, and sustaining traditional expectations of roles and tasks has now reached

crisis point. The situation requires the breaking of moulds, but it manifestly leads to distress and breakdown, and as the heart goes out of ministry it sometimes turns into mechanical routine. Many feel that the traditional job has become so demanding that it becomes simply impossible, so that we all feel failures. Anglican ecclesiology is dying the death of a thousand pastoral reorganisations, and the populist notion of ‘new ways of being church’ is certainly hastening its demise with its implicit denigration of the whole concept of ‘parish church’. It does not seem to work any more, and we find ourselves as official guardians of what now seems an out-dated consensus of beliefs and behaviours. The old coherence has gone and our theology of priesthood needs renewing.

How do we prepare ordinands to serve in these changed and changing circumstances? Clearly, the theological curriculum has itself become a controversial subject. The pressures are such that re-shaping tends to happen in a piece-meal way - a bit of this, a bit of that, while also trying to adjust to the constant overloading of the syllabus with new demands to be in touch with the latest fashionable styles and their accompanying rhetorics.

I recently read the first inspection report of the new body which replaced the north east academic consortium in which NEOC had been a partner. ‘Lindisfarne’ is concentrated in only two of the four dioceses in which I had worked, and is now narrowly Anglican, but works across a broader range of provision, bringing pre- and post-ordination programmes together with Reader training and diocesan adult learning packages. This widened context for theological education is one for which I and many others had worked over many years. But the inspectors are now calling for greater differentiation of provision for ordained and Reader candidates, which appears to me entirely regressive. There seems to be a renewed concern for proper exposure to the Anglican tradition, which is commendable in a period when new, untested varieties of pioneer ministries for fresh expressions of church are the latest alternative on the block – but the inspectors seek a return to an outmoded curriculum classification of academic, practical and formational, which I and others had spent years attempting to weave together. I can’t help feeling aggrieved at the dismantling of what I once cared about. There is more I could say about current trends in experience-based learning which majors in competencies, portfolios, target-setting and pre-arranged learning outcomes, and I’m sad that the university accreditation which I spent so long setting up for NEOC with our regional universities because I thought that our theological mission was to be a full and creative participant in our professional culture, has now become an unbearable burden. It looks as

though from 2012 the Church of England will be priced out of Higher Education, and we shall be back to where some of us began, with the church's own GOE/GME!

So I feel there is still a long way to go, or perhaps significant ground to make up, as the 21st century unfolds. I think the urgent need is to reach some clarity about the central purposes of theological education for priesthood. What is it we are training priests for? This cannot be addressed in advance, or in theory, apart from the conflicts and tensions that disturb the church. Re-thinking theological education must happen from the ground up, from the starting point of actual practice. Of course, it *is* being defined in practice – as it always has been. Theology always arises from *the life of the church in the world*, from the way in which the living tradition in each generation interacts with new contexts, new pressures, and new questions. All of us with responsibility in the church are in fact producing its operative theology, the theology everyone can read, the theology written in our lives and actions.

Social and Sacramental priesthood

From the starting point of actual practice, priesthood appears primarily as a social reality, and its roots lie deep in human culture. There exists a fundamental common priesthood that is an inescapable aspect of being human. It is natural for people everywhere to look to one another for affirmation, for stimulus, for enabling, for healing, and for insight and access to dimensions of life beyond the trivial and mundane. This universal priesthood is not ours to control - but it is necessary to pay attention.ⁱ

It happens in most cultures that certain people are invested with some form of sacred character and who become symbolic bearers of things that really matter. This universal common priesthood is usually, and primarily, informal and unstructured - somehow woven into the fabric of social existence - but there is also an institutional necessity for sacral people to represent, articulate and focus, by means of language, life and ritual, what is otherwise diffuse and undeveloped. Everywhere in human societies priest-specialists appear as foci, prototypes, exemplars, models, patterns for interpreting the more fundamental, universal common priesthood. They are (to use Austin Farrer's telling phrase) walking sacramentsⁱⁱ, and their function is to facilitate the priestly life of the whole community.

In one sense, the New Testament questions all this. It speaks of relationships with God and other persons that are free and not bound by any social or institutional constraints. But it also

witnesses to structural order and routine as well as anti-structural charismata and spontaneity. So from the New Testament onwards there has existed a tension, a contradiction, between institutional and anti-institutional elements. This tension is alive and well today, despite our impatience with it, and often our inability to live with it. Sacral priesthoods are inevitable and necessary. They are not always benign, and organised religion does not always genuinely uphold the fundamental common priesthood of humanity.

This all-embracing notion is not widely observed in churches. Lip-service is paid to the concept of what is sometimes called a “priesthood of all the baptised”, but if that becomes individualised or reduced to congregational membership, and is not rooted in common human reality, it becomes difficult to say why we need an ordained priesthood at all. We might as well fall back on the “priesthood of all believers”. If all are priests, none are. Churches that live to themselves and not to the world are not real priesthoods and have no need of ordained priesthood. But the world still needs concrete models of intangible things, sacraments that point to God’s grace, icons that focus attention on realities that, because they exist everywhere, are very hard to see. *The world* needs something like an ordained priesthood (even if some churches do not) that can be clearly seen and understood as a sacrament of the whole church - and ultimately of all humanity.

Organised religion, though inescapable, is not guaranteed to be always in the service of the universal common priesthood. Everywhere in human societies priest-specialists appear, whose function is to facilitate the priestly life of the whole community. They can only do this if they occupy a natural place within the larger community - they cannot do it if they exist in a segregated way of life or separated area of interest. They can only minister effectively *in* society, and not from the margins, *to* society. It is so important to get this right. It was this common priesthood that Jesus lived out. Jesus was not a priest of religion, not an ordained person, but he brings the common priesthood to its fullest expression, he interprets and clarifies it, by his life and teaching, one who was also totally at home in the everyday world of human communities. The New Testament describes his priesthood as in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6, quoting Psalm 110:4) - in other words, an expression of the oldest and most universal human reality.

This is not new. Priesthood belongs in human culture. There is nothing theological which is not, first of all, simply human. This age-old principle is constantly being re-drawn. The New Testament was one such re-drawing.

Priesthood and leadership

How these issues were understood in the early Christian churches remains a fascinating and contested debate. An earlier consensus held that the anti-structural, fully charismatic fellowship of the first Christian communities only gave way to official roles once routinisation set in. But there is also a clear line of thinking in the New Testament that God calls and commissions particular people to particular tasks and offices, as pastors, teachers and interpreters. In current thinking and practice, this emphasis is being reduced to organisational, managerial and motivational control in re-mapped parishes. I do not think this is the way forward. Beginning from *the life of the church in the world* does not mean merely replicating the latest big ideas from the organisational and business worlds. But neither is the New Testament a ready-made blueprint for all subsequent generations and circumstances.

Christianity often found it difficult or problematic to survive or grow in complex, rapidly changing and possibly hostile environments, and so needed some clear articulation of its public life. It was therefore necessary and inevitable that ordained Christian priests took on what we might call executive and managerial functions: presiding, supervising, alongside teaching and interpreting the tradition out of which the church's values and way of life developed. It is important to emphasise this fact: precisely because ordained priesthood grows out of the memory and tradition of the human priesthood of Jesus, it also grows out of the needs and requirements of every local, social and political context. The theology of priesthood grows from actual practice in context - it is never merely abstract theory imposed onto each new situation but is discovered afresh organically, as the church constantly reassesses its position and standing in a changing world.

So there can be no abstract or absolute definition of what a priest is. The ancient forms of priesthood we inherit are temporal and relative, not absolute, and all theologies of priesthood are the results of historical development. Clergy are not the fundamental issue. This is surely the basic and essential dimension of Anglican ecclesiology, the presupposition of God's activity in the world. The fundamental issue is whether this basic theological principle is best preserved by defending the traditional territorial parochial system, and by focusing our curricula on preparing ordinands to operate that system. If God is the creator of all community, then the church's purpose is to focus and make known this universal claim through structures placed firmly in contemporary society, not focused merely on gathered congregations.

Anglican ecclesiology only works through reference to wider society, and the Anglican church is embedded in society because the church's task is to evoke within society a sense of God's purpose for society as a whole. The presence of a parish priest in each community has been the defining image of the church's natural and expected place in society at a local level, the very heart of what the Church of England is. But parishes have become anachronistic structures in all but the most rural contexts. The priest as manager of multiple parishes will inevitably shift the focus of the relationship between priest, people and context. Our most urgent problem is to find an appropriate new means of sustaining those essential relationships in changing contexts. And my point here is that the solutions do not lie solely in structural reorganisation or in leadership strategies, but in a developing theology of priesthood.

Priesthood and Vocation

“We are not human beings having spiritual experiences, we are spiritual beings having human experiences”ⁱⁱⁱ. The church, including its priests, must be located and rooted in the human world. All of us are being shaped by the Christian tradition as we seek to integrate it with everyday reality. The primary motif of all theological education is growth in fundamental humanity as a prerequisite for first-hand theology. To ask what theology is for is not an easy question in a utilitarian age which treats everything instrumentally. Priesthood must be centred in what is fundamental, and not merely functional. The term *priest* (unlike other words like ministry and mission) speaks uncompromisingly of *God* - and it retains a resonance in ‘secular’ culture, especially now that secularisation theories are increasingly discredited. In the past we have sometimes tried to define ordained priesthood by some common core of activity, which increasingly these days seems to be some target-driven notion of ‘leadership’. The mistake here has been the failure to recognise that the church is not an organization that exists for utilitarian purposes but an institution historically embedded in the fabric of society.^{iv} It is tempting to begin with a contractual understanding of the priestly role, which is certainly the direction the Church of England has taken as a response to social change – freehold has been replaced by common tenure. But priests were not until recently either diocesan employees or paid servants of the laity. The earlier function of a diocese was to enable clergy to follow their vocation, not to be their employer, appraiser and administrator. Now we are rapidly moving into an era of contractual obligations and managerial directives, and however necessary, we must ensure that they do not obscure what lies fundamentally at the heart of priesthood.

So I think we should begin with a broader understanding of ourselves, firstly as human beings, as people of vocation, with what we believe God holds out to everyone. Vocation is basically about who we really are and where we truly belong, not what we are contracted to do. True vocation is always corporate, never individual, and it is true and necessary for every human being. For Christians, this universal reality is focused in the Christian community, which is the bearer and interpreter of the universal common priesthood of humanity, clarified and brought to fullest expression in Jesus. Its ordained priests are carriers of what is true for everyone. The priest is the bearer of the church's theology, and called to hold before the church its own priestly calling. So how are priests to be theologians? How are they to bear, to live, the church's theology? More acutely, what then are theological educators for? Surely it is their task to help current and future priests develop first-hand theologies of their own, drawn from personal knowledge and experience in real everyday contexts and settings in God's world, and supplemented by drawing on all the resources of the whole Christian tradition. It is a tall order, the work of a lifetime, but I understand theology as a personal, practical, liturgical and reflective discipline that becomes a way of life, a matter of a person's whole being. This is the reason I have always been so committed to the worker-priest model of ministry, worked out to some degree in the now disregarded concept of MSE and NSM. Was this truly pioneer form of ministry represented in such contemporary standards as *Mission Shaped Church*? Not a word!

Western churches still operate a career model. Stipendiary ministers are only temporarily attached to their cures, and often become isolated professionals, even though the principle of one parson in one parish has now become impossibly stretched. The model does little to develop a sense of the fundamental priesthood, and still tends to set up congregations and parishioners as passive clients, not active participants.

If priesthood is so fundamentally and profoundly to do with person and character and daily living, then central to the theological curriculum should be the education of the whole person in the life of the world. This is a critical process, and should allow no separation between academic learning, spiritual development and ministerial formation. Learning and spirituality, faith and scholarship, context and mission need to be held together. Handling the Christian tradition is not learning facts or texts. Handing on the tradition also deconstructs and reconstructs it. It is more than absorbing the past; it is about bringing our understanding of the past into dialogue with the contemporary world. Theology for priests is living in this interplay - and theology is therefore always in the interim. Nor is theological education only for academics

- it is insufficient merely to imitate secular university models. It has been well characterised as "wisdom and godly habit of life"^v.

Of course, none of this is exclusively for the ordained, and separated theological colleges ought to be things of the past. Once upon a time, not long ago, the majority of our ordinands were being prepared for ministry in regional Courses like NEOC.^{vi} The Colleges have since consolidated their considerable influence, and at least one new privatised College has sprung up in London, all with connivance from Bishops, and with the resultant diminishment of the Ministry Division. I cannot help thinking that partly as a result of these moves, theological education still only trickles down to the laity - there needs to be so much more integration. Jesus interpreted the fundamental human priesthood of God's creation in basic terms of a new humanity, and completed it by fully living it. It means that the ordained should learn to take the common priesthood more seriously than their ordination. Their calling is to inhabit ordained priesthood in full solidarity with the whole priestly people with utmost inclusiveness and generosity, recognising the harm which false cultures of clericalist status have done to it.

The essential character and purpose of priesthood does not belong to the sphere of ecclesiastical organisation. When that happens, the idea and scope of universal ministry is lost from view and Christian ministry becomes trivialised to internal church matters and, usually, the exercise of petty power. A balance needs to be recovered - all turning to God is also a turning to the world as God's creation and as the scene of God's continual activity. Our basic theological perspective should be one that affirms the ministry of the whole church in the world as primary and normative, a ministry that embodies and expresses the basic universal priesthood of humanity. It is in this context that we must find the distinctive identity of the church's ordained priests, the bearers of the church's theology in the life of the world.

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ⁱ This theme is admirably developed by LW Countryman: *Living on the Border of the Holy* Morehouse, Harrisburg 1999, and by KS Mason: *Priesthood and Society* Canterbury Press Norwich 1992, to both of whom I owe a great deal.

ⁱⁱ A Farrer *A Celebration of Faith* 1970 p. 110

ⁱⁱⁱ Attributed to Teilhard de Chardin

^{iv} Cf. M Percy *Shaping the Church* Ashgate 2010 p.114

^v ACCM22 *Education for the Church's Ministry* 1987 p. 37

^{vi} Cf. research by Mike Parsons suggests that so-called part-time training is clearly not inferior to so-called residential training, despite popular perceptions (Church Times ? 2011)