

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON MINISTRY
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The Commission on Ministry has tackled and made progress on several important issues – such as opening up the possibility of Part-time Stipendiary Ministry, and the provision of Mediation and Severance Terms in the event of Pastoral breakdown; research on the Auxiliary Ministry, and in this year’s report a review, after ten years, of Women in the Ordained Ministry (Appendix E page 369).

Having been privileged to travel with the Commission on the entirety of its journey since its inception in 1996, although I would be happy to speak about any or all of these topics, I want instead, in the limited time available to me, to summarise where I believe the Commission and the Church of Ireland in general have got to on the wider question on ministry, the bigger picture, particularly following the Summit on Ministry and its follow-up.

I would make five brief personal observations to review progress thus far.

1. THIS IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN THE **ORDAINED** MINISTRY

The debate we are involved in has consistently refused to be reduced simply to a question of how we might reorganise or re-deploy clergy, in order to maintain some sort of traditional provision of clerical ministry. It is not just an issue to do with having enough clergy available to provide priestly ministry – even though that is one very important element in the overall scheme of things.

As the process has gone on, more and more people have been joining the ranks of those who genuinely believe that a basic presupposition of Christian ministry is that it is the privilege and responsibility of every one of us to share in the ministry, rather than a case of the people in the pews being the more-or-less passive recipients of ministry done to and for them by the omni-competent clergy.

This awareness is reflected in the diocesan submissions we have received, such as that from Dublin, *‘There needs to be a radical shift in our understanding of ministry so that we realise it is the function of all the baptised. The ordained ministry is but one aspect of ministry in general.’*; or from Tuam, *‘Christian ministry is for everyone, certainly not just the ordained clergy.’*; or from Down *‘Every baptised and believing Christian is a minister.’*; or again Dublin, *‘Ministry is the function of all the people of God.’*

2. ESSENTIAL TO THIS AWARENESS IS THE RECOGNITION OF GIFTS

If it is true that every member of the church has a ministry role, it makes sense to argue that we must find out the strengths and aptitudes of each Christian so that all of us, whether ordained or not, may be deployed in the sphere of service for which we are best suited and equipped. God has given us all gifts; we must identify what they are, be trained in how to develop them, and authorised to use them. Again, this

recognition is reflected in comments from the dioceses. Clogher, for example, stated, '*Ministry is what Christians do in using their God-given gifts.*'; or Limerick '*Basic to effective ministry is the discernment and appropriate use of gifts/ministries by the local (church) community.*'. Appendix A on page 360 of the report deals directly, and I think helpfully, with this very issue.

3. ORDINATION IS AS IMPORTANT AS EVER

An observation I would make is that, despite all this (appropriate) emphasis on lay ministry, the ordained ministry, far from being undermined in the process, is still very much acknowledged as a high and worthy calling. There is no diminishing whatsoever of the importance of the call to ordination. It's just that its place is seen much more in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God rather than in any kind of splendid isolation. In fact, the leadership role of the ordained is recognized as crucial to the effective operation of all the others. As Connor put it, '*The vocation of priesthood is a vocation to Leadership in the church, to equip and enable others to exercise their ministries.*'

4. IF TEAMWORK IS THE KEY, LEADERSHIP IS EVEN MORE CRUCIAL

A new term has emerged in church vocabulary with which we are all becoming more familiar, namely ***Collaborative Ministry***. Cashel, (a diocese obviously well ahead of its time!) is quite taken with the whole idea: '*Collaborative ministry has caught the imagination of our committee*'. It means that ministry is teamwork, or as the chairman of our Commission puts it on page 367, '*Ministry should, in every setting, be explicitly a shared enterprise.*'. But any kind of teamwork or shared enterprise is heavily dependent on skilled leadership to draw it all together.

In some comments I made about the pivotal contribution the leadership role that clergy can and should make in promoting teamwork and collaborative ministry (quoted on page 362 of the report), the Principal of the Theological College, Dr Adrian Empey, with his characteristic wit, humorously suggests that the gifts I am expecting to find in clergy are more commonly found in admirals and generals – or even rottweilers for the Lord! But I still hold firmly to the view that the future condition of the church and its ministry, humanly speaking, will be highly dependent on the ability of ordained leadership to '*envision, lead, inspire, train, teach, delegate and mobilise a whole team of people who know what their gifts are and who collaboratively use them creatively in the church and in the world.*' The leader (invariably the ordained leader) must so convince the people of the worthwhile ness of what needs to be done, that people respond by giving wholeheartedly of themselves and their God-given gifts for an enterprise they believe is entirely worthwhile.

5. PROACTIVE PLANNING, CREATIVE THINKING ARE NOW CALLED FOR

From the Terms of Reference of this Commission (page 356), it may have been expected that the main outcome of this process would have been more about pointing to new ways of developing and deploying

ordained ministry. My firm belief, however, is that the most influential, long-term impact of this Commission will be the mobilization of hundreds and even thousands of people, lay and ordained, in ministry throughout the church, working collaboratively as teams, finding appropriately creative ways to make a fresh kingdom impact in each parish and community

The clear message that went out from the initial Summit on Ministry and particularly its sequel is that the initiative now rests with each diocese to creatively encourage and explore fresh ways to work out local expressions of collaborative ministry. Short-term pilot projects? yes; experimental patterns? yes; fresh approaches suitable for local needs? yes. One possible example, Local Team Ministry, as developed in Argyll and the Isles, is cited in Appendix D on page 366, but there are many other possibilities.

At this stage this is not a matter of synodical legislation or of constitutional amendment, nor of structural reform, but much more about mobilizing people in creative ministries for which they are appropriately gifted, suitably trained, and above all strongly motivated to serve. There must, of course, be careful selection, suitable training, appropriate authorisation, and constant review, to channel and oversee these experiments wisely, but with this kind of sensible oversight and creative leadership there is much scope for fresh approaches.

Change there will have to be, and Appendix C (on page 364) is all about how wise and careful proactive planning can help the transition process to be negotiated more successfully and less traumatically than when it is badly managed and poorly communicated.

CONCLUSION

In 1999, this commission reported to the General Synod that, following our visits to the first group of parishes, we were met with a pretty traditional understanding of what parish ministry should look like – the omni-competent single-handed rector acting as the primary and even sole agent of ministry. We noted then that: *‘The expectations that people have of the ministry of the church remains traditional and conservative. They want a priest alone to fulfil the roles of pastor and visitor, and prefer to see an ordained priest in church every Sunday.’*

The challenge now is to help the church at large move forward in its expectations of what ministry will look like in five, ten or twenty years time, to prove that we are willing and able to think creatively, to plan strategically, and not just rely on methods that are no longer best suited for the demands of the brave new world in which we must all minister.

I have much pleasure in proposing that the Report of the Commission on Ministry be received.