



The Minister as a Member of the Fellowship

The fourth in a series of articles by Dr Montagu Barker on Stress in the Ministry.

When patients see me in my clinic, or are admitted to my ward in hospital, they have been sent to me because they are sick; I treat them, and the state of my health is irrelevant. Similarly, those who go to a counsellor have problems to sort out; a contract is made, and it is considered irrelevant whether the counsellor has problems within him or herself or not. In both cases, the relationships must be strictly professional.

However, the same is not true when someone within the fellowship comes to the minister; the member has needs and so does the minister. Furthermore, they belong to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is the failure both to see and experience this which lies behind some of the most distressing situations which I have had to deal with in Christian workers' lives and families.

No pastor

Many ministers refuse to have a pastor, and many cannot find one when needed. Like doctors, ministers are supposed to be able to look after themselves; they are professional carers, so surely (the question goes) they do not need anyone to care for them, do they? When I discussed this with a very able and godly French minister, I asked him who his pastor was, he just shrugged his shoulders and replied, "The Lord." The essential cause of this is that since entering theological college, ministers' supports are largely clerical. Their sustenance has been the company of other clergy, with fraternals, retreats and conferences. How inadequate they prove; they are the very worst places for ministers to be pastored! Ministers meet and discuss their work, with banal generalities about recent encouragements. I myself have spoken to ministers' fraternals and seen how little real sharing goes on.

How can you say you are depressed and feel a failure, that the work is going badly and you feel responsible? How can you share that your home life is in chaos, with your wife having gone off you sexually, and the children acting up mercilessly? All you can share is vague generalities, and exaggerate the spiritual growth of the work.

Clergy do not care well for other clergy, doctors care very badly for other doctors and lawyers give terrible advice to fellow lawyers because they identify too closely with the other person. In medicine, we are well aware of this, if a little ashamed of ourselves. When I see a doctor as one of my patients, I have to remind myself that while in my clinic, he is just someone who has problems. I may meet him later in committees, and see many issues in him that I recognise in myself; yet I must regard him as a person who is depressed. I know that my heart is beating faster and my blood pressure rising, but if I make concessions simply because he is a doctor, I will eventually run into trouble. Some doctors find this easier than others; but we do not care well for our kith and kin because we identify in this way.

Now, theoretically, Episcopal churches should give better pastoral care to their minister. I have been immensely impressed with the caring of some bishops. But I do know that not every bishop gives this sort of support. Nor have I found the quasi-bishops and fellow-ministers of the reformed churches particularly good at giving support either. When a crisis blows up, the pastoral machinery sometimes works well; but it rarely prevents a crisis. The real question is how to deal with issues before the crisis blows up.

A shocking story

Some time ago as the consultant on call for that day, I was asked to see a minister who had become profoundly depressed. It was the beginning of an on-going saga, from which I am quoting with his express permission. Having become depressed, he wrote the following letter to the person who should have had pastoral care of him:

The position here is becoming increasingly impossible: the problems are worsening each week, the pressure is steadily mounting in me to do something. In this tense situation, some action must be taken, the only real answer is to bring my ministry to a close. You will appreciate that this has not been taken lightly or without regret. The last two years here have been dark indeed, testing my faith to its uttermost depths.

I cannot yet say that light shines but only that faith beckons towards that which might be light. In the circumstances, I do not ask for more than that, although I am sure that eventually light will dawn.

The implications of this step are far reaching, and I would appreciate your advice and comments on the necessary procedures to be taken regarding church, house, etc.

The pastoral reply came back:

Thank you for your letter of the 21st. I am sorry that you feel you must leave the ministry. Nevertheless, if this action helps you to clarify your own mind, and to open for you a field in which you can successfully serve, then I wish you well on the course on which you are about to embark.

Now I come to practical matters. I presume you have obtained a local authority grant, to keep you and your family during your proposed course of study. You ask for my comments and advice about church and house: it seems to me that having now made up your mind to take this course, you should resign as from three months' time. You cannot reasonably expect the church and the other churches in the area which have been wanting to have a group ministry for some time to wait indefinitely. As the house will be required for the leader of the new group, you should apply to the local authority for housing. As you are aware, you occupy the house on a service tenancy.

Kind regards to yourself and your wife.

This was a most harrowing experience. That minister had an expectation of support and sustaining during the worst crisis of his life. I am very glad to say that some clergy from another denomination gave him and his family the spiritual support they needed during that time. It was I who had to minister to him when he ground to a halt.

To add insult to injury, after a long period of no formal connection with his denomination, he received from one of the church's committees a letter sent five years to the day after he had resigned his charge. It was a formal duplicated letter which read:

We have been asked to review the list of clergy not in pastoral charge; the chairman has asked if any member knew of the following: (there followed a list of names, among which was his own).

That was the ongoing pastoral support he received.

Fantasy fellowships

What lies at the root of such situations? Though I have taught in theological colleges for some years, and believe that they have a very real place in training, in my view they have much to answer for here. So often, ministers never learn to relate to a fellowship after leaving college.

The Anglican college of Cuddesdon, outside Oxford, was started by "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce when his curates and ordinands began to share life together in his house. When he then institutionalised it, a great opportunity was lost; something which was of the essence of what he gave in the early days was gone.

A college has an esprit de corps, a fantasy fellowship, which becomes the ideal. Compare the recent graduate, who is never quite able to recapture the atmosphere of his undergraduate Christian Union days, and so does not settle into the ordinary fellowship of his local church. In the same way, the minister's craving for that former fantasy fellowship is insatiable. The church fellowship which now seeks to embrace the minister is somehow inadequate to satisfy. Is the reason for this that seeds of clericalism are sown in the college days, as an expectation of fellowship largely with fellow-clergy develops? I am caricaturing: but it seems to be that this inadequacy is present in, and stems from, most colleges.

Wife's resentment

If the student is married, college may mark the beginning of the spouse's resentment, especially if they have a family. The spouse may feel excluded from the college fellowship: the breakfast, the worship and the lectures. She cannot be involved with him in the local church fellowship either, and often feels that she goes down spiritually while he feels that he is expanding, maturing and gaining so much from college life.

The clericalism develops into isolationism, and non-communication with the congregation. How congregations smart under the verbal lashings of new curates! Charles Simeon called them "congregation butchers". He had been one himself once.

I well remember my first exposure to an Anglican church; the curate, straight from theological college, would slate

and thrash the congregation. How dare he speak in that way, when I knew how many godly men and women were there with a deep spirituality! Given patience, love and a few years, they mellow; but very few really learn to draw from the fellowship.

The whole family

Things are changing and a new generation of ordinands are much more aware of these issues, though they may well get a tough time at college because of this new attitude. Why cannot a student and family be truly linked to a local fellowship and freed from the tug of loyalties? They could become involved in the local church, not with the ordinand as an extra assistant, but the whole family as ordinary Christians taking an active part in that church, members of the fellowship.

That would help the student to listen, to learn and to be ministered to by the fellowship. Many of the leading laymen, from whom most is expected, need the clergy to understand their many pressures, not thrash them to ever deeper commitment. They need to feel that the clergy respect them, that they can discuss their responsibilities, and that the clergy will understand their need to pull in their horns a little at times.

Shared responsibility

This leads to a sharing of responsibility, if the minister also shares things with a few confidants in the fellowship. I well remember my surprise, conviction and challenge when my minister first shared his difficulties with me. That stimulated prayer, concern and commitment on my part. There must be persons within each church, some family perhaps, with whom ministers can pray and talk, expressing their fears, doubts and difficulties. There must be those who will own' ministers, loving them, binding up their wounds, comforting the family, or ministering to a minister's singleness.

The minister cannot share with his assistant, as the assistant is only there temporarily to be trained. The assistant cannot share with the supervisor who is the assistant's boss and will be writing reports and references.

Many congregations have no concept of care. But equally, there are many men and women within those congregations that are able to care, but afraid to offer. The first move may have to come from the minister. God will call us to account for our failure to minister to our ministers, and will call ministers to account for their failure to allow the fellowship to minister to them.

The Lord's carers

Jesus had his favourites. It was well known who his special friends were. It was known which house gave him a particular welcome and some good food. It was known which women supported him financially. It was known whose garden he went to, to retire, be quiet and pray. There was nothing exclusive in these relationships, he was friends with all. But these were the special situations. Incidentally, there is no indication as to how frequently he used those closest to him in this way.

Our problem is that we are so often exclusive; that is destructive. Yet there are situations which need to be special for the minister. Despite that, some colleges still teach against having close friends within the congregation.

Daring vulnerability

"God trusted himself to a carpenter and his wife," Harry Williams has written. "Christ trusted himself to Judas and to Peter. That is vulnerability which shows." Surely it is within the fellowship that our true supports must be. It is within the fellowship that all Christians have something of themselves invested in each other, as we bear one another's burdens. It is within the fellowship that our minds, even our minister's mind, is renewed.

Here the ministers can receive feedback on their ministries, and a sober appraisal of themselves. Here the spouse and family can belong, and the difficult adolescent children of the manse can find other adults to relate to and identify with.

I know that these are words of perfection; congregations are just not like that. But unless our ministers believe and practise it themselves, how can they preach it to others? The fellowship will never be like this unless they do preach it, look for it, pray for it, and then pioneer it themselves. Unless they are prepared to be open and vulnerable, how will congregations be prepared to open up to them?

A few years ago, I was being rather stuffy and difficult with my vicar, Paul Berg, about becoming involved in some parish activities. I was pointing out my difficulty in having several people in the church who were my psychiatric patients. In his inimitable way, he replied, "You know, Monty, even the witch-doctor has to be a member of the tribe!" That pulled the carpet from under my feet, but it was immensely helpful and liberating. The difficulty is still there, but I do not run off; rather I learn to handle it better. The tension is increased, not decreased, but I now know what I am working towards.

Investments

If ministers function as professionals within their fellowships, they will be treated and used as professionals. Clients do not want to know about the needs or difficulties of their professional carer. The body has only one head and that is Christ.

For the fellowship to mature, it needs to become truly the body of Christ and ministers must become a part of the body. Christ is the head, not the minister. They tell their congregations that they are a fellowship, a *konōnia*, with shares invested in each other. What shares do the ministers have invested in their fellowship? Do they enter into fellowship with them, sharing their weaknesses and also their visions?

Support

I am sometimes asked, not as a psychiatrist, but as an ordinary Christian person, to assess missionary candidates and future ministers. As well as looking at family and marital relationships, I look at who is sending and supporting them. If they have not received care themselves, then I question who is calling them to care for others.

A Scottish divine has expressed this well:

The point is that none of us can work effectively on our own. We must be sent out by the church, by the praying church, whatever nondescript company of Christians that might be; many missionaries feel out on a limb, and all on their own. They may well question their calling unless they can find help and guidance to relate themselves to some group somewhere who are prepared to own them, and who will care for them.¹

Ministers serving in missionary situations at home face similar pressures. Many of those I know who have gone into situations that were regarded as hopeless have again and again found a couple of marvellous old saints to share with, pray with and who have taken a special care for them as a family. Yet previous ministers had viewed the situation as devoid of that kind of support!

Two or three will do who are willing to own, care for and thrust their minister forth into battle. Ministers may not discover this until they have their first charge and then they discover that, all unknown to them, certain people had been patiently fishing in all the waters for their new minister, until up he came and both 'fish' and 'fisher' met with delight.

Alas, if ministers do not want or expect such people, they will not find them!

Full integration

Michael Griffiths, in his excellent book *Cinderella with Amnesia*, writes, "I seriously wonder whether a high percentage of problems about which Christians seek counselling would ever arise at all, if they had been properly instructed congregationally, and fully integrated into the fellowship of God's people". I am sure that is true, and that it is truest when ministers themselves are part of such fellowships.

After lecturing one day in a theological college, a terrified student came up to me and asked, "If I had someone like you in my congregation, what would you expect of me?" I was stumped as I had never been asked that before

nor thought in those terms. My reply was: "I would hope you would study and expound the Word, helping me to apply it to every aspect of my life so that I was not living in two worlds."

Now, reviewing my experience of the great needs of ministers, I would add, "You need to be one with us and in order to be able to do that, we both need to be members of the fellowship." Who is sufficient for these things? It is God who enables us, and a living fellowship is part of that enabling.

Endnote

¹ Still, William. *Work of the Pastor* (Rutherford House, Edinburgh, 1996) 122

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