

Why Collaborative Ministry?

The Priority of Love

The most important and distinctive characteristic of genuinely Christian ministry is love. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest command in the Law, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," and went on to make it clear that the second stood beside it in importance: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). As he was leaving his disciples, he gave them a 'new commandment': "That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:14).

The disciples' love for one another was to mark them out as Christians. If we aspire to walk in their steps as Christian ministers, our ministry should be marked by the kind of love Jesus taught and demonstrated. But this, the New Testament warns us, means that we will be involved in a struggle. Christian love does not come naturally. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It emerges in our lives only to the extent that we "live by the Spirit" and not according to what Paul calls "the flesh" (Romans 8:5-8). To engage in ministry in order to fulfil our own needs, such as to be noticed, to be significant, to be needed or to have power in the church, will prove an obstacle to the development of God's love in our lives.

While Jesus was on earth, his disciples frequently demonstrated 'fleshly' tendencies. In fact, the presentation of the disciples in the Synoptic Gospels often reads like a series of object lessons in the kind of attitudes the Christian minister should be careful to avoid! The pride which led James and John to believe they had a right to the principal seats in heaven (Mark 10:35-37) was quite invisible to themselves but only too visible to their colleagues and, moreover, it led to indignation and potential division. Thankfully, we discover later in the Gospel story that Jesus did not expect the disciples to have become perfect before he entrusted them with the responsibility for preaching the Gospel and building his Kingdom. Rather, he used the call to ministry as a means of perfecting them.

The Place of Collaboration

'Ministry' literally means 'servanthood'. The call to ministry acts as a means of refining us and leading us to maturity because it is a call to service. When his disciples grew indignant at the pride of James and John, Jesus pointed them all to the call to serve rather than to be served, even at the cost of one's life (Mark 10:45). It was in taking the role of a servant that Jesus showed his disciples the kind of love they were to display towards one another (John 13:1-17). The servant does not have an agenda of his or her own. He or she simply obeys the master. He does not expect recognition, other than that of a job well done; or reward, other than his master's pleasure. The call to ministry thus 'crucifies' the 'fleshly' part of us by demanding a self-

forgetful and self-giving love, the attitude that Jesus himself displayed (Philippians 2:5-8).

One aspect of ministry as loving servanthood is collaboration. According to the Church Representation Rules the duties of the Parochial Church Council include, "co-operation with the minister in promoting in the parish the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical." The mission of the Church is thus not the business of the clergy alone. It is a co-operative venture requiring collaboration between clergy and laity. A more recent development is the creation of leadership teams of various types, including both clergy and laity. The emphasis on collaboration provokes two important questions. First, what is genuine collaboration? and second, why is collaboration now held to be fundamental to Christian ministry? As little as two generations ago, ministry was still largely held to be the work of the professional clergy. Is the current emphasis on the involvement of the laity merely a response to the declining numbers of clergy? Or does it have a coherent theological justification?

The Doctrine of the Trinity

One of the most fundamental aspects of Christian faith is the doctrine of the Trinity. How can God be both three and one at the same time? The witness of the Scripture and the experience of Christians tell us that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are fully God yet distinct from God the Father. This was an issue which taxed the theologians of the early Church. None of the accepted ways of thinking in either Jewish faith or Greek philosophy was capable of explaining it. Either God the Father had to be the real and only God with Jesus and the Spirit lesser and perhaps created beings. Or Father, Son and Holy Spirit had to be three 'faces' or 'appearances' of the one God, whose real being was more profound than any of them.

The answer to this puzzle was worked out in the fourth century and is associated in particular with Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. They proposed that we should recognise two quite different senses of the verb 'to exist'. The first of these translates roughly as 'to have a certain nature'. Thus, a dog has a 'doggy' nature; when we see a dog we recognise it as an instance of the general category 'dogs'. But in the case of God, Basil and Gregory proposed a second meaning of 'existence'; in other words, they said, God does not exist because he is the sole instance of the category 'God'. Rather, each person of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has what we might call 'personal existence'.

If we ask what 'personal existence' means, the answer is that it means 'existing in relationship'. The Son is who he is only in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. The personal being of the Spirit comes about only in relationship to the Father and the Son. Father, Son and Spirit are not three different 'appearances' of the one divine nature. Each has their own 'personal being' and this personal being is not only logically prior to the nature that all share in common but actually makes that nature what it is. Divine nature is the nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in relationship.

'Personhood'

The ideas of Basil and the two Gregorys have been taken up and developed by the Greek Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, especially in his book, *Being as Communion*. In the impersonal world of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, his ideas are becoming increasingly influential as Christian thinkers search for a firm ground for ideas about human personality. Knowing that human beings are created in God's image, the conclusions of the early Church about the persons of the Trinity may be applied to human beings. We too have personal existence. We have individuality, symbolised by our personal names. We know ourselves and are able to reflect on ourselves as the subjects of our own unique experience which we hold in our memories. We are aware of having a destiny and the future of our individuality is supremely important to each one of us.

However, none of these things originate in persons understood simply as individuals. Zizioulas and the growing number of theologians influenced by him believe that the origin of our personal identity lies in relationships. Of supreme importance is the relationship we all have, whether we acknowledge it or not, with God as creator. Everyone has to respond to being a creature in a created world with a mandate to play our part in both 'subduing' and peopling the earth, as Genesis 1 puts it. In addition, we are each born into a network of earthly relationships and it is in and through these relationships that our identity or sense of self comes to be. We literally cannot exist without being sustained by a network of relationships. Our relationships are not incidental to our lives but actually constitute them. We become who we are only in and through relationships with others.

Loving Relationships

Our experience of the world tells us that, while some relationships are extremely beneficial and help us to thrive and flourish as people, others can be destructive. The relationships which enable us to thrive are those through which love is expressed. We are created in relationships and made both to love and be loved. God the Holy Trinity, who is the source of our personhood, is the model of what it means to love. The Bible even goes so far as to say that God *is* love. In other words, love is not an attribute or quality of God. Rather, the relationships of Father, Son and Spirit, which constitute God's being are the definition of love.

In creating the world, God created human beings with a purpose and potential which they were free to choose or to reject. To say that God loves us is to say that he desires us to come to our full potential, to become the people we were created to be. For us, to 'love' is to desire and promote the purpose of God for each individual person and for the community in and through which each individual comes to be. As God's redeemed community, the Church is to be a sign to the world of God's being and purpose. As Christian ministers, therefore, our most fundamental commitment is to the expression of love in its fullest possible meaning in the Church, the love which echoes the nature of God and demonstrates Jesus to the world.

So where does collaboration fit in? True collaboration is an expression of God's nature. In Christian collaboration, each of the partners is committed not just to the

purposes of God, but to the fullest possible flourishing of each of the other partners. We rejoice as both our partners in ministry and the people we serve together grow to become the people God made them to become. By working together in relationships of love and service to one another, we embody the nature of God at the heart of the Church.

The Trinity is the original of all collaborative ministry. God's mission to the world involves Father, Son and Holy Spirit in full and loving co-operation. When we look at Jesus' earthly ministry, we are struck first of all by his obedience to the Father. "The Son can do ... only what he sees the Father doing," he says (John 5:19), and, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4). Secondly, we are struck by his empowering by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who descends upon him at his baptism (Luke 3:22), leads him into the wilderness (Luke 4:1) until he returns in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14) to announce, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:18). Later Jesus says of the Spirit, "He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:15). In the mission of Jesus we see Father, Son and Holy Spirit working together in perfect love and perfect harmony.

The loving, serving relationships which Jesus himself modelled are at the heart of Christian mission. To work on the quality of our relationships is to work on mission. God is displayed in relationships which reflect those of the Trinity. As Paul frequently reminded his churches (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:1-16), the Body of Christ consists of unity in diversity. No one person has all the gifts necessary to build the Church. All display different facets of the call of Jesus to the Church, and all are called to love the others into the full realisation of that call until, "All of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Further Reading

The following are books of theology which explore the meaning of personhood and its source in the Trinity and in the image of God.

Zizioulas, John D, *Being as Communion*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985

Gunton, Colin, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, T & T Clark, 1997

White, Vernon, *Paying Attention to People*, SPCK, 1996

McFadyen, Alistair I, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*, Cambridge University Press, 1990

Heywood, David, *Divine Revelation and Human Learning*, Ashgate, 2004