



The Ministry Today: A Survey of Perspectives

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Ten titles will be surveyed in this article which offer significant perspectives on the effort to define ordained ministry for our day. The first two are studies sponsored by the Association of Theological Schools. The next three interrelate with insights from other disciplines. The sixth title is significant for its historical scope and reflections on ministry. The three next titles are added for their theological perspectives. The final title is a reprinted classic from an earlier generation. Eight of the titles derive from mainline Protestant traditions, including two from England. Two titles are from the Roman Catholic tradition.

1. THE PASTOR DIRECTOR

The term Pastor Director was given significance by H. Richard Niebuhr in his study, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956; reprinted, 1977). After reviewing the changing concepts of ministry, Niebuhr concludes that Pastor Director best fits the role of the ordained clergy in our day. The altar and pulpit are no longer the center for the many complex functions in the modern church. The church office has now become the center out of which the Pastor Director directs the activities of the church. Niebuhr states that this view has precedent in the bishops in the ancient church who were overseers of their local parishes.

The term Director may come on a little strong in our day of emphasis on lay activities, but Niebuhr's study continues to have significance. It places ministry within the context of the church—but not a church that is a local, private institution insensitive to its responsibilities and mission to the larger society. In Niebuhr's understanding, reflection and action, study and worship belong together in the training and life of the Pastor Director needed to enable the church to carry out its purpose in the world.

2. THE PERSON FOR OTHERS WITH A FAITH TO SHARE

The second title, *Ministry in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), is a study under the leadership of the Association of Theological Schools a generation

later. This shows itself even in methodology. We are now dealing with the survey method of the social sciences, computer technology, and the high involvement of parish clergy and significant lay involvement—some 5,000 persons in all. We need to deal honestly with this data. Significant items uncovered and utilized in the study certainly are dated, but it is my impression—having visited with hundreds of lay persons, pastors, and interns over the last six years—that the data is highly accurate even today.

With few exceptions the minister leader desired, and to whom people can relate, is the fellow human who is compassionate and understanding. These personal characteristics are highly developed prior to formal training for ordained ministry. At the same time this person is to be a person of faith. Some denominations place more stress on one than the other, but they are both desired. Moreover, there is a wide range of skills in relating to people of all sorts and conditions which is expected. Niebuhr's study of an earlier generation was right in identifying a pastoral director type as one who could hold together all of these various combinations for the building up of the body of Christ.

This more recent study is also significant in its documentation of the uniqueness, as well as similarities, among the various American denominations. There are demonstrable differences that seem to defy the common leveling influence of media religion. The interpretive essays in the volume also point this out. However, one gets the impression that the writers were often hard pressed to find uniqueness, in spite of denominational emphases, in regard to ministerial leaders. Is the study telling us that in a day when genuine ecumenicity is on the wane we are drifting into an ecumenicity of American folk religion that differs only to the degree to which it stresses traditional Christian symbols in its worship life? Is the study telling us from its empirical research that human warmth and piety is sufficient in ministerial leaders for the local religious communities? A careful reading of the charts, graphs, and essays tells us both yes and no. There is still a stubborn loyalty to the heart of the Christian tradition, but more than ever people want the message of the gospel to be effective in the life and attitude of the messenger.

3. THE SEER, A REPRESENTATIVE LEADER IN A PLURALISTIC RELIGIOUS CULTURE

Bruce Reed in *The Dynamics of a Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978) writes first as a behavioral scientist and secondly as a theologian. Reed's study is carried out in England, but it is equally valid for our American scene. He makes a penetrating analysis of the interrelationships between churches and society. In Part One he analyzes the larger scene, and in Part Two he deals with leadership in the local church. The analysis begins with the study of the dynamics of worship as a process by which people come from their daily work into a dependency on God for renewal, in order to go back into life to take up tasks for the welfare of the society. This religious activity can also be short circuited into a dysfunctional religion which is ethically impotent and removed from the realities of life. Reed also defines two types of churches—the communal, which takes responsibility for the whole community, and the associational, which is made up of like-minded people often over against the community. "The mission of the

church as the body of Christ is to be present in the world so that men and women may respond to his love by accepting his redemption to the glory of God and the benefit of humanity" (p. 145).

The primary task of ministerial leadership as priest, pastor, evangelist and prophet is to see factors that hinder this mission and to renew people through liturgy and preaching to carry out this mission. Reed writes with the prophetic urgency of the Old Testament prophet.

Reed has to be read carefully, but his work gives the reader ample rewards. His primary language is from social psychology. His state church background may come off as culture religion. On the other hand, there is something radically traditional in his focus on the minister as leader in ministry of Word and sacrament, the Reformation doctrine of vocation, and the Old

Testament critique of a pluralistic religious society that has become ingrown and ethically impotent.

4. THE SYMBOL BRIDGING THE COMMUNITY AND GOD

The crisis of priesthood for the pastor in industrial secular society is the issue Urban Holmes seeks to deal with in *The Priest and Community* (New York: Seabury, 1978). Holmes challenges the identification with the professional or clinical model and draws from anthropology and the history of religion to re-examine the role of the holy person, the *shaman*, who acts as the linkage person between the community and God. The *shaman* is at home in the receptive mode of thinking, employing symbol, myth, and active rationality.

The priest is the mystagogue to lead people into the mystery that surrounds our life. The priest has to learn from the *shaman*, but not imitate the latter. The biblical analogy is the trip into the wilderness, including privation and suffering, so as to open the mind to what is hidden from others. Out of this journey come the inner resources of faith which are recognized by the community as authentic. "The priest in the church is called to serve this priesthood of Christ, to stand in the midst of the cloud of unknowing, to lead the community to the consciousness of God's saving word, and to invite into God's strengthening arms those who are far from his presence" (p. 177).

For those of us raised on a functional view of ministry, Holmes' perspective is heady tonic. We see prospects of a neo-Donatism. Holmes certainly is sensitive to the demonic potential of the priest claiming this power for himself or herself. But people are looking for the authentic person. They want to see the message effective in the life of the messenger. Some of us remember the days when we were told that preaching was no longer valid, and that we had to move to drama and other forms of communication. This was short lived. People want the authentic voice from the pulpit, not the voice of an actor. Perhaps this was the authority that the common people saw in Jesus. We may not all fully agree with Holmes' perspective, but we have to come to terms with it.

5. THE ECCLESIASTICAL ADMINISTRATOR MONITORING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A study which has not received sufficient recognition is one by Peter F. Rudge, *Ministry and Management* (London: Tavistok, 1968). It could be that persons in-

terested in theology are usually turned off by management theory, and that persons into management are not into theology.

In Part One Rudge goes into the development of ecclesiastical administration. In Part Two he discusses organizational theory: traditional theory, charismatic theory, classical theory, human relations theory, and systemic theory. He then borrows from Paul Minear's *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), for his four basic pictures of the church—the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship of faith, and the body of Christ. Rudge states that there is no biblical analogy to the classical, bureaucratic model. However, he does relate the imagery of the people of God to the traditional theory, the new creation to the charismatic theory, the fellowship of faith to the human relations theory, and the body of Christ

to the systemic theory, which he feels has the most potential for ecclesiastical administration in our day. He then discusses each of these in terms of the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of church and society, the doctrine of ministry, the purpose of the church, the doctrine of God, and Christian anthropology.

Under the doctrine of ministry Rudge deals with each of these relating to the priest, the pastor, and the prophet. He sees the minister's task as the monitoring function to see to it that the church fulfills its goal to "increase the love of God and neighbor." "The function of the leader is to monitor the organization, not to run it or drive. He gives the perspective, not the orders; and the control is not through close supervision in relation to regulations but by reference to the purpose of the whole body to which the members are committed" (p. 125). Rudge also develops this on the level of the Bishop's function.

A great deal of the minister's time is spent in administration. Rudge can help us think it through theologically and biblically in a way that we can see it purposefully and not as an aberration.

6. THE SACRAMENTAL PERSON MINISTERING TO THE FAITH OF THE COMMUNITY

"Certainly, much of the classic performance of the Christian ministry by clerical 'professionals' is outdated: and the widespread role-identity crisis among ordained clergy (in all churches) indicates that the precise function of Christian ministry is today unclear." With this introduction Bernard Cooke sets about a monumental task of history and theology in his *Ministry to Word and Sacrament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

Cooke identifies five functions of ministry: ministry as formation of community, ministry to God's Word, service to the people of God, ministry to God's judgment, and ministry to the church's sacramentality. Each part is treated separately by tracing the function through the New Testament, the Ante-Nicene, patristic, medieval and modern eras. Each section closes with a theological reflection on the data uncovered in the historical investigation.

Cooke maintains that different views on Christian ministry are grounded in different soteriologies. "Dependent upon the manner in which the Christians looked upon the action of God in Christ and upon the church's role in that action, they understood the function of Christian ministry" (p. 187).

Even though Cooke has more data from the Roman Catholic tradition than

any other, the wealth of material is highly informative. Most of us from the non-Roman Catholic tradition tend to leap from the New Testament to the Reformation in our effort to understand ministry. We also limit the functions to Word and sacrament ministry and see the other functions as modern aberrations. Cooke helps us to see that other functions have existed in the history of the church, and he fills our knowledge gap with data from the Ante-Nicene, patristic and medieval eras of the church. He certainly identifies many issues of ministry—especially the interrelations between the ministry of the laity and the clergy. In trying to understand special, ordained leadership, he sees it functioning as a representative sacrament within a sacrament—the Christian community. He gives no easy answers to the questions, but he does leave the reader with a sense of awe in being a part of a long tradition of the people of God in Christian ministry.

7. THEOLOGIAN OF THE CHURCH IN THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Theological Foundations of Ministry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) is edited by Ray S. Anderson of Fuller Theological Seminary. Anderson has collected a series of writings by persons who share common views of ministry as theologians of the Word of God. If some of the other volumes cited above move in First and Third Article areas, this one certainly is Second Article. Christology sets the tone of the whole volume. Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance are utilized most often. Other writers included are Ray S. Anderson, Helmut Thielicke, W. A. Whitehead, Hans Küng, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ignacio Ellacuria, Kornelis Miskotte, and Karn Griffen. The various selections deal with “A Theology for the Church in Ministry,” “Jesus’ Ministry to the Father on Behalf of the World,” “Jesus’ Ministry in the Spirit for the Sake of the Church,” and “The Church’s Ministry to the World on Behalf of Jesus.” Ministry is the church’s ministry, and it is focused in the ministry of Jesus. The ordained ministry is a special ministry out of the baptized ministers of the whole church. It is incarnational, kerygmatic and diakonal.

The volume presents a wealth of dogmatic theology that puts ministry, lay and ordained, in its proper perspective. Unfortunately the number of pages will scare many readers away. However, it can be read by sections and by authors. The section on proclamation is good reading, and it serves as a reminder as to why we are in the business of preaching and who we are—ministers of the word of God.

8. THE LEARNED THEOLOGIAN IN THE CHURCH’S MISSION

Reading Richard John Neuhaus’ *Freedom for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979) may engender a sense of guilt in all who do not measure up to his high standards. However, he does have a feel for the parish with all its imperfections and ambiguities. His wide reading draws on insights from our culture, as well as from the history and theology of the church, in order to put direction in ministry. There is no doubt that he feels deeply about the validity of parish ministry, realizing that its validation is not derived from the secular society in which we live. His sections dealing with preaching are in themselves worth the price of the book. “The preacher is thinking about his sermon all the time. Preparation involves a great deal of creative wool gathering, picking up little bits and pieces

from unexpected places. Pastoral calls, counseling, family chatter, all may be homiletical subjects—once the theme has been finally fixed” (p. 178). These are reflections of a person who has been there and utilized the rhythms of total life in the parish—not only time spent in study—as a part of the message to be preached. We see here a perspective that draws on wide reading, theology, and the reality of daily life in the parish—all blended together with a Pauline cockiness as part of the identity that carries one through the various crosscurrents of ministry into today’s society.

9. THE PRACTICING THEOLOGIAN INTERACTING WITH THE STUFF OF MINISTRY

James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead from the Center for Pastoral and Social Ministry at the University of Notre Dame have written a very helpful book to enable integration of theology and ministry, *Method in Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1980). They draw freely on the insights of Paul Tillich and David Tracy in developing a model and a method for

theological reflection by the Christian minister. The model deals with three sources of information: the first is the Christian tradition—scripture and the ways it has been interpreted in history; the second is personal experience—that of the individual minister as well as the particular Christian community; the third is culture—philosophy, political interpretations of the human community, and the social sciences.

The method or dynamic of reflection moves in three stages. The first, “attending,” is a teasing out of the available information in the above three areas. The second, “the intermediate stage,” is being assertive in initiating a dialog between the various sources of information. The final stage, “the decision stage,” is to move from reflection into pastoral and corporate action.

The Whiteheads articulate the difference between the role of information gathering and theological reflection in academic circles seeking for a greater clarification of the faith, on the one hand, and the ministerial setting preparing for pastoral action, on the other. They take into consideration the corporateness of the church and the role of the laity in arriving at the sense of the faithful. Parish pastors will also appreciate their sensitivity to the limitations practicing ministers labor under in attaining the desired information in biblical, theological, and cultural areas for theological reflection. They move with understanding between the desirable and what is more often attainable for practicing theologians interacting with the stuff of ministry.

10. THE PROPHETIC STATESPERSON IN THE LOCAL SITUATION

We began these perspectives with a Niebuhr, and end with a Niebuhr. Reinhold Niebuhr’s classic, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Chicago: Willette, Clark and Colby, 1929; reprinted, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), has been reprinted in paperback. In this book Niebuhr demonstrates in a series of reflective journal entries from his ministry practice what the Whiteheads are talking about—but with a difference. He writes for a generation in which theological reflection was often the work of the pastor theologian as a lone ranger in the quiet of the study. The Whiteheads deal with the collegiality of clergy and laity in the

task. But the model and the methodology are not much different. Reading Niebuhr is seeing a master at work in theological reflection. He sees the role of the pastor as a modern prophet needing the wisdom of a statesperson. He sees it as a difficult task subject to much criticism in a world that is not necessarily open to prophetic insight. He concludes his preface with the words, “Having both entered and left the parish ministry against my inclinations, I pay tribute to the calling, firm in the conviction that it offers greater opportunities for both moral adventure and social usefulness than any other calling if it is entered with open eyes and a consciousness of the hazards to virtue which lurk in it.”

CONCLUSION

The above perceptions are different, but they have some things in common. They seek to come to terms with the demands of ministry in our complex, pluralistic society—the authority issues, the authenticity issues, and the multiple demands on the minister’s time. They understand ministry from within the corpus of the church but in relationship to the larger society. They struggle with clarifying the ministry of the ordained over against the ministry of the laity. They seek to deal with the role of women in ordained ministry, but not adequately.

I add a closing impression. Loren Mead in the December, 1976, *Newsletter* of the Alban Institute discusses various types of authority in ministerial leadership in parishes. He cites five basic types: role, knowledge, expertise, otherness, and charisma. The first four receive varying degrees of attention in the literature surveyed. Charisma, the ability to hold high a banner and inspire a following, is not really held up as a perspective. Perhaps mainline churches are afraid of the potential Jim Joneses. But perhaps we also hold down potential Martin Luthers, Knoxes, Wesleys, Martin Luther Kings, and Pope Johns. At least we are safe, but perhaps also a bit dull.