



HOW TO BE A CHURCH MINISTER

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INTRODUCTION

Viewing the territory

This book has its immediate origins in a visit to the Houses of Parliament Shop in Parliament Square, London. While browsing there, I noticed two books with the title *How to Be a Minister*, one by the late Sir Gerald Kaufman and the other (with the subtitle *A 21st-century guide*) by John Hutton. The ministers in question, of course, were entirely different from the ones described in this particular volume. They were concerned with the skills and understanding required in being a minister of the Crown, a role into which many Members of Parliament are pitched with little preparation and that represents the height of their political career. Without denying the fact that a Christian minister will also be confronted with the need for some political skills – churches after all being composed of people of all shapes, sizes and dispositions – the exercise of governmental power is not primarily what is at stake here. Christian ministers are servants of God and of God’s church, entrusted with the ‘cure of souls’ (to use a helpful, if now old-fashioned, term). Their concern is with the spiritual life, with the relation of persons to their creator and redeemer, and consequently with the health and well-being of congregations as the corporate expression of such life. Although in the eyes of many this will be seen as a marginal and irrelevant occupation, for those who believe in the Christian gospel it will be the highest calling that may be given, requiring the best that can be brought to it.

Having noted the two above-mentioned books, it soon occurred to me that the title might just as well be employed in setting out something of what is involved in becoming and being a minister of Christ. Granted, there is a diversity of terms in use at this point, including ‘priest’, ‘pastor’, ‘clergy’, ‘deacon’, ‘presbyter’, ‘bishop’

and 'elder', according to the differing traditions within the Christian churches (all of which terms we may have cause to explore below), But there is also a commonality of tasks and responsibilities in ministry, though with differing emphases.

And there is no shortage of literature attempting to do what this book attempts; this is well-trodden territory. We might recall here classics such as Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, George Herbert's *The Country Parson* or Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*. A glance at my bookshelves brings to mind more recent and representative titles, such as *The Work of a Pastor*, *The Protestant Ministry*, *The Art of Pastoring*, *First Among Equals*, *Understanding Ministerial Leadership*, *Moral Leadership*, *Transforming Priesthood*, *Ministry: A case for change*, *Creative Church Leadership*, *Ministry and Priesthood*, *The Shape of the Ministry*, *Making God Possible* and, simply, *Pastor*. This is to say nothing of the available literature on leadership in general or concerning pastoral theology, a term that, however broadly it might now be applied, originally dealt with the office, duties and tasks of those called to minister. Well-worn the path may be, but the need for any 'reflective practitioner' to think carefully about what he or she is called to do is constant and ongoing. It is this that provides the rationale for another contribution to an admittedly well-populated field.

In this book, therefore, I set out a particular perspective (as all perspectives must be) on what is involved first of all in becoming a minister and then in fulfilling that calling in a responsible and consistent way. It draws on a broad understanding of the biblical origins of ministry and churches' long reflections on their practice, and also necessarily from extensive experience of both working as a minister and training and forming others for their work. It will become obvious that I write as a minister in a free-church tradition. Although I hope not to come across as a Protestant 'red in tooth and claw', I certainly have a free-church bias. However, I trust there will also be evidence of understanding of the nature of ministry in more catholic and episcopal traditions. While I hope for the sake of

greater mutual understanding to compare or contrast these differing approaches, and there will certainly be points at which I explore disagreements, I aim to do all this with an irenic and constructive attitude. In the spirit of corrective ecumenism, we all have much to learn from each other. I am also conscious that much of the energy in church life now exists in swathes of new or minority-ethnic churches whose conceptions of ministry can sometimes sit loose to the church's traditions. While there is much to value in these new perspectives, I hope to show that there is much in the older traditions that can inform the practice of mission and ministry today, however much we tend towards a contemporary style.

Ministry in the New Testament and beyond

An introductory word offering a sketch of ministry in the New Testament is in place here. All developed understandings of ministry are elaborations of patterns we see emerging in the New Testament. Certainly, the mission and ministry of Jesus must serve as the basis and model for all subsequent ministry. If it is understood that the risen Christ continues to minister to his church today, then all forms of ministry are in fact manifestations of what Christ continues to do by the Spirit in building his church (Matthew 16:17–19). The ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher, referred to as gifts of the risen Lord for the building up of his body (Ephesians 4:11–13), are but charismatic manifestations of the fullness that is in him who embodied all these gifts in his incarnation and, having ascended to the Father, continues to do so for the sake of the church. It is through these effective Spirit-filled ministries that the church at first sprang into life and continued in being. They may be thought of as 'translocal' in that their first objective was to spread the church throughout the ancient world.

Christianity was a missionary movement before it ever became an institution. In time the first bursts of charismatic energy that grounded the church began to require more regular, local forms of

ministry to ensure that what had begun would endure. The New Testament gives evidence of varying forms of church life, reminding us to be respectful of a wide degree of flexibility. But in churches such as those founded by Paul and Barnabas, the apostles either appointed or caused to be elected (both meanings are possible) local elders who would oversee the work (Acts 14:23; 20:17). Overseers/elders and deacons are first mentioned by Paul in Philippians 1:1 and the qualifications for these roles are dealt with in more detail in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9 (and I return to these passages in chapter 14).

Although in this book I am hesitant to use the word ‘priest’, for reasons that I shall in due course explain, the relationship between elders and deacons appears to me to be similar to that between priests and Levites in the service of Israel’s tabernacle and then temple. The priests had the ‘upfront’ roles of leading and presiding; the Levites tended to the work of the tabernacle in the background, making sure all was in order. A pattern therefore emerges in the New Testament church of charismatic ministries energising the churches and in time establishing more structured forms of local leadership to ensure their work continued and was sustainable. There is a saying that without people nothing happens but without institutions nothing lasts. I would understand if many readers objected to the word ‘institution’, yet if that word can be detached from the idea of bureaucracy it does point to a necessary truth: movements need to stabilise around an orderly pattern of operation and relations in order to endure. It is unfortunate when institutions become devoid of charisma, but charisma without order tends either to explode or to dissipate. The key is for institutional order to accompany, support and be the vehicle of charisma just as the skeleton supports the life of the body. Ministry should live in this beneficial tension and thrive because of it.

The New Testament also makes provision for the development of future ministers: ‘And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also

be qualified to teach others' (2 Timothy 2:2). The thread of succession proceeds here from the original apostles, to the elders they have appointed, to the further generations that they in turn will prepare and appoint to carry the witness into the future. Christian ministry therefore has the nature of a relay. Those in the present generation are raised up by God, but they also enter into the work of those who have gone before and should be preparing those who are to follow on. This can rightly be understood as a form of apostolic succession: a faithful handing on of the apostolic witness and an engagement in the 'apostolate', the active mission of God that is shared with the whole church. The apostolic ministry is therefore part of the whole church's apostolic mandate to preserve and transmit the gospel of Christ.

After the New Testament era, a significant variation took place within the pattern of elders and deacons. As the churches expanded and the generation of the first apostles passed away, some elders took on wider responsibility for the churches in a locality. In the New Testament, two words are used interchangeably for elder: *episkopos* and *presbyteros*. The first means 'overseer' and the second connotes age, and therefore wisdom. The derived words 'bishop' and 'episcopal' came into use to refer to duly appointed overseers of an area or 'diocese' in which they would act to unify the separate churches, to care for ministers, to safeguard the church's teaching and to facilitate its ongoing mission. This innovation gave rise to an understanding of ministry as three-fold in character: bishops, presbyters and deacons. The pressure to move in this direction also arose from the need, in an age when deviations and heresies were emerging, to have a reference figure who could guard the normative Christianity of the apostolic witness. This was a crucial step at a time when, although the New Testament writings were in circulation and regarded as authoritative, the canon of writings by which Christian truth could be judged had not yet been commonly agreed and finalised, pushing teaching authority in the direction of the bishops.

Not all present-day churches accept the need for a threefold order, many believing that a twofold pattern of elders and deacons is adequate. Not all those who accept a threefold order wish to endorse the flummery and trappings that go with some forms of episcopacy. Yet even those who endorse a twofold order often set some of their elders aside for translocal, bishop-like roles in support of the church's leaders at large. These may go under names such as moderators, superintendents, regional ministers, apostles and chairs of district (and, as so often, Americans find a word for this generic species of ministry and call it 'the judicatory'); but the fact that they are found to be necessary suggests that there is a practical wisdom to the idea of the threefold order. From the point of view of this book, it will become clear that there is a tension between episcopal and congregational ways of being church. In episcopal traditions authority is mediated largely through the bishops acting in communion with each other. In congregational traditions authority is understood to reside within the congregation, allowing them a high degree of freedom. Both traditions do, of course, acknowledge that all authority is to be exercised under Christ and by the Spirit.

Intended audiences

As I write, I have certain groups in mind who may find this book helpful. First, there are those who are experiencing and exploring a call or vocation to ministry. A short time ago those in this category were likely to have been both young and male and may well have seen themselves preparing for a lifetime's career as ministers. Those days are now past, and this seems to be the case across the spectrum of denominations. The profile of those contemplating the possibility of ministry is now as likely to be female as male and more likely to be someone older, already qualified for and reasonably initiated into one career, and now facing the implications of another. They may already be experienced as 'lay' leaders in a congregation, and in some traditions it may even be in that same congregation that they are being singled out for service and leadership with a view to

training on the job. The advantage of such an altered situation is that those called bring their prior experience of the worlds of both work and church into their new vocation. The disadvantages are the possibility of considerable unsettlement for a whole family and that it might be less easy to embrace the necessary personal changes that evolving into a minister demands. In addition, once set on the pathway to ministry such candidates will inevitably give fewer years to the task.

We should by no means conclude that younger candidates should be discouraged, since by contrast they will have longer to give to the work. They will also have more time to engage in varied forms of ministry and so to accumulate valuable experience and, we hope, wisdom. It is also arguably the case that those who rise to the most senior positions in the churches (if we can talk in these terms) are those who start relatively young and have time to develop. So, the principle here should be that everything depends on the call of God, and when God's call comes to a person, whether younger or older, they should respond. Whichever way, Jesus taught that when we contemplate a new enterprise it is wise first to count the cost (Luke 14:28-30). For many, there may be a romance attached to ministry, and this should not be discounted. But the reality can be far from romantic; ministry inevitably involves times of struggle, disappointment and strain, as does arguably any worthwhile vocation. So, by explaining what ministry demands when fulfilled at its best, this book sets out to enable such a cost to be counted and confronted.

This brings us to a second group for whom this book is intended: those who, having settled the matter of vocation, are in the process of preparing to minister. Once more, an older pattern of life dictated that those called and selected for ministry would spend an extensive period of time, ranging over several years or more, studying and acquiring the knowledge and understanding that they would need for their vocation. This might happen in a university, theological college/seminary or combination of both, and it would take place

at the level of higher education. More will be said about such study in its place. For the moment, it is worth tracing a shift that has taken place in theological education, as it has similarly done in other professions. It was once imagined that if a person received a sound academic education they would be able to pursue their vocation in a satisfactory way. Academic achievement was paramount. As it happens, much training for ministry now takes place alongside the practice of ministry, under supervision, in a way that integrates learning and doing rather than first learning in abstract before engaging in doing. It became clearer that in addition to academic education there was a need for more extensive practical training, that is, assistance in knowing how to do things as well as how to understand things.

A further step has been taken, stressing that it is not only what we know and what we are able to do but also the kind of people we are that counts. Sometimes this progression is summed up as ‘head, hand and heart’, or ‘comprehension, competence and character’, all of which constitute the ‘pastoral imagination’, the ways we come instinctively to think and to behave. Emphasis now falls therefore on the idea of ‘formation’, which replaces neither education nor training but sets them both within a new personal framework of who and what we are becoming. We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). Christ makes his appeal through us. The contents of this book aim to assist this process in the minds of those who are currently preparing for ministry by opening up in some detail what is involved in such a demanding life and helping to shape what we are becoming in fulfilling it.

Third, I hope that the book may have some value for those who are already deeply involved in the work of ministry and may have been so for some time. Mid-ministry, like midlife, has its peculiar challenges. Some years ago I was invited as a college principal to benefit, along with a variety of others, from a training day for those with serious management responsibilities. It was a good day and it began, as these things do, with the participants introducing

themselves and explaining to the group why they thought they were there. I was first to speak and my mind went blank. I could not in the moment think why indeed I was there. However, by the time everybody else had spoken I had worked it out. It was not as though I was a beginner; in fact, I was quite well on in age and experience. I had well-established patterns of doing things. But I came to see that the value of the seminars for me was the opportunity to check my practice against the principles that were being expounded and test whether I might do certain things differently. In fact, I received a number of insights with the potential to improve my performance while confirming other things as good practice, even though I had learnt to do them largely through sheer instinct. Something in this reflects one of my preferred learning styles, which is by comparison and contrast with alternative ways of thinking and doing. This points to the fact that although there is much in common in the work of ministry (and there are those things that must simply be done), each person needs to find his or her own style and does well to engage in constant reflection on their understanding and performance. This book could provide a stimulus in this direction.

Finally, I have in mind those who, like myself, have now ‘retired’ from ministry in the sense that they are no longer in stipendiary charge. This period of life has its own challenges, not least in that, I would guess, most ministers still define themselves as such while recognising that they have now taken a back seat. We do not shed our identities easily. Most ministers would look back with joy on the privileges they have enjoyed in the course of their lives. It would be surprising if they did not also carry regrets, disappointments and, in many cases, wounds that have accrued along the way. In particular, the retired might wish to review how they have fulfilled their commission and to celebrate what has been good while seeking God’s forgiveness for the times they have failed. It is hard to imagine that there is not at least a measure of the latter. Yet the purpose of reviewing the past is not to be imprisoned by it but to live beyond it, and this seems to be necessary in embracing the constructive forms of ministry that continue into the third age. T.S. Eliot wrote in *Little*

Gidding, 'We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' His words point to our need to consider what our work has all along amounted to. Perhaps this book will help in making sense of our working lives.

The language of ministry

Although I strive in this book for a degree of objectivity, it would be inappropriate not to speak at times in the first person. I will offer my own reflections and some of my experiences for what they are worth. Within the overall framework of the faith that has been bequeathed to us we are nonetheless called to exercise discretion and discernment. Personal judgement is indispensable, and this volume will contain its fair share. Readers should feel free to substitute their own perceptions according to preference.

We have already pointed to the diversity of terms in use to identify ministers. Behind the terms lies a diversity of theologies ranging across a broad spectrum. I hope this book is of value across a wide front, but it will be obvious at points that it operates with an understanding of 'ministers' that may itself be contested. The word 'ministry' can be used in both broader and narrower ways. It is entirely right to say that at one level all God's people are ministers in that they are called to 'works of service' (Ephesians 4:12). For this reason, some prefer other words than 'minister', ostensibly in order not to undercut the ministry of the whole people of God, of which the generic word 'leader' is the most obvious alternative. By contrast this book works with the assumption that the ministry of the whole people of God is also focused at times in individuals who are rightly called ministers, as they are in the New Testament, and who act as living catalysts for the ministry of the whole (for examples, see Luke 1:2; 2 Corinthians 3:6; and other verses where 'servant' and 'minister' are interchangeable, such as 1 Corinthians 4:1 and 2 Corinthians 11:23). The mission of the whole congregation

is sometimes best achieved by individuals working in its name and with its approbation. Any Christian grouping will need to make its own choices about the terms to use. Those who think to avoid the word 'minister' are welcome to 'spit out the pips' from what follows and use their own language but should still find material of value in this book.

I do acknowledge the danger that any book focusing on ministers might unintentionally undermine the thoroughly biblical stress on the plurality of ministry and leadership in the local church ministry. But so might other words, such as 'leader' and 'pastor', in their own way. Pastoral care should be understood in personal, collegial and communal terms as ministers, elders and the church community as a whole watch over one another in love. Each dimension is significant. There are some who wish to hold a 'low' view of ministry in favour of a 'high' view of congregational participation. Yet the New Testament is clear that there are those to whom a particular charge is given to 'feed my sheep' (John 21:15–19), a charge not everybody receives. Whether or not I achieve it in this book, my aspiration is to marry a high view of ministry with a high view of congregational participation.

I attempt here to produce a book that for ease of reading moves swiftly and to that end deals with each topic in relatively short chapters. I offer a framework rather than an encyclopedia. Ministers will progressively develop their own philosophy and distinctive practice and may find further guidance in the recommended reading at the end of the book. An important health warning does need to be given, which concerns the title, *How to Be a Church Minister*. Becoming a minister involves growing into competence in a variety of directions, but is far more than learning a number of techniques that produce the desired results. Such an approach would be to depersonalise ministry, ourselves and those to whom we minister. Whereas we have no investment in incompetence and poor practice, in weak leadership or rank amateurism, we nonetheless recognise that in working for God all of us necessarily go beyond what we are

capable of and can fulfil our commission only by God's grace and in the power of the Spirit. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty' (Zechariah 4:6). Whatever we have in terms of learning, wisdom, skill and competence is worth nothing without love for God and dependence on the Spirit of Christ.

There will be some elements of repetition in what follows, as I try to outline similar ideas in different contexts. When referring to the Roman Catholic Church I use the adjective 'Catholic'. However, I use 'catholic' to identify those wider communions that share much in that tradition but are not exclusively Roman.



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This timely book sets out what is involved in being a church minister – its joys and challenges, its privileges and responsibilities. It discusses the call to and the work of ministry, the breadth and nature of the task. It will enable you to understand your calling more fully and inform your practice. It will stimulate careful and biblical reflection. *How to Be a Church Minister* is relevant across a wide spectrum of church traditions, both for those already in ministry and for those contemplating the vocation. It is set to be a seminal volume on the subject.

Nigel G. Wright is Principal Emeritus of Spurgeon's College, where he taught theology from 1987 to 1995 and was Principal from 2000 to 2013. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and the Royal Historical Society. He is a prolific author and is widely engaged in preaching and teaching nationally and internationally.



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