

Hampshire Rural Group Paper – Assistant Clergy

Synopsis: *The increasing number of assistant clergy is a welcome development in ministerial provision, especially in the countryside. However working out how they fit in to the structure of ordained parochial ministry depends upon local context and relationships, as well as diocesan policy. This lack of clarity and element of subjectiveness is a source of anxiety for some. This paper suggests that the ancient concept of the 'cure of souls' still may be able to offer a fruitful model of the relationship between Bishop, priest and people rooted in pastoral theology.*

Background – Ordained authority in parish ministry

All ordained ministry derives its authority from that of the Bishop, who shares his episcopal oversight of the diocese with priests¹. In specified geographical areas, parishes, this is done either by the Bishop sharing the *cure of souls* with the priest as incumbent, that is the spiritualities² of a benefice, or by the Bishop issuing a *Licence*.

Licence and Cure

The *cure of souls* as understood in the Church of England involves duties, which are specifically listed in Canon C24: the duty of saying daily offices, celebrating Sunday Holy Communion, preaching each Sunday, teaching the Christian faith, visiting schools, preparing confirmation candidates, visiting sick and infirm, giving spiritual counsel, consulting with PCCs, and from Canon B37, taking Home Communion. John McNeill in his authoritative history says that "in the phrase *cure of souls* the word *cure* has something like the range of meaning of the Latin *cura* from which it comes. The primary sense of *cura* is *care*, and it is readily applied either to the tasks involved in the care of a person or thing, or to the mental experience of carefulness or solicitude concerning its object."³ So all incumbents with the cure of souls are Bishop's *curates* in the Book of Common Prayer sense⁴, and so everyone else is an *assistant curate*.

The *Bishop's Licence* conveys the Bishop's authority to the parish priest "to minister the Holy Sacraments, to read the Common Prayers, to preach the Word of God and to perform other ecclesiastical duties in the Parishes" including "the pastoral care and responsibility for the parishioners thereof"⁵.

While there is obvious overlap between the defined duties of clergy with the cure of souls and those working under Bishop's licence, the former makes clearer the responsibility for spiritual care/cure within the benefice, significantly as a *partner* with the Bishop in his *cure of souls* – the spiritual and pastoral relationship between the Bishop and the people of the diocese.

The practice of licensing raises new questions⁶. Licensing is a legal and pragmatic answer to a theological, relational and spiritual question: the pastoral care etc is permitted rather than shared. It is also a subtle reduction of the rich concept of cure of souls down to administering Holy Sacraments, reading prayers, preaching, pastoral care and 'responsibility for the parishioners' and 'other ecclesiastical duties'. There is no explicit emphasis on the formation of the priest, whereas in the cure of souls the prime duties are personal and corporate spiritual formation through daily prayer and weekly sacrament. There are suggestions of line management and one way delegation and accountability embedded in the asymmetry of the licence. It represents a change of the terms of relationship between the Bishop and the people of the diocese.

In the Hampshire Rural Group's paper on *Pastoral Reorganisation in Rural Areas* (2007), it was suggested that the cure of souls might still be a valuable concept even in the 21st century Church of England. "Eugene Peterson contrasts the *cure of souls* with 'running a church', which he argues is the secularized corruption of the role of pastor, and, we might say, a multiple snare in a multi-parish benefice. The responsibility for the cure of souls is worked out in seeking the salvation of the people through instruction and sanctification through the sacraments, the centre being the altar of Christ in the particular place and church (Karl Rahner)."⁷

Although almost forgotten and certainly understated and sedimentary in view of the many licenced clergy of incumbent status, the most coherent model of clergy parochial responsibility remains that of the cure of souls shared with the diocesan Bishop⁸.

Assistant clergy - A welcome development, but ...

If there are complications in the above, then they multiply with the appointment of assistant clergy, who may be stipendiary or self-supporting⁹. All assistant clergy are in fact assistant curates, even if some such title as 'associate vicar' or 'associate minister' is used¹⁰, intending incumbents' level status. As such they are licenced by the Bishop but also subject to the (theoretical?) additional insecurity, compared with incumbent-status licenced clergy, of their appointment depending also upon the goodwill of the incumbent (/priest in charge?)¹¹.

Co-workers? In practice, if working with an incumbent, the assistant clergy will share some of the cure of souls, in terms of pastoral care. However, this cannot be formally delegated to the assistant by the incumbent because it is shared with the diocesan Bishop, unless the Bishop permits. So the first question might be whether assistant clergy are subordinate to or co-workers with the parish priest in the cure of souls (though without the temporalities

or spiritualities of the incumbent¹²). The practice in the Diocese of Winchester is to work out between incumbent and assistant a Ministry Agreement which respects and protects the role of the assistant — and indeed that of the incumbent too. The agreement has a section on *Oversight*, which suggests that the assistant priest ought to consult the incumbent before major liturgical or pastoral changes are made because she formally has the cure of souls. This seems to imply that assistants might well consider making such changes unilaterally, but should not do so — a reduced view of the relationship, which really should be collegial.

Assistant status? Then there are questions about status, real and perceived. Incumbents can feel threatened when their assistant clergy are thought to be of equal status to them. Rivalry can develop. Some feel diminished if they are in a role that they perceive as inferior, or are made to feel so. Pride and greed are always subtle temptations in parochial ministry and quickly undermine ministerial relationships. It is not so in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Stuck? For most assistant clergy there is at present no position of greater responsibility to which they can aspire¹³, especially those who are tied to living in a particular area by their work or family commitments. It is somewhat similar to the old perpetual curacy. 'Feeling stuck' can diminish self-confidence. The issue is played out both within the incumbent's and assistant clergy's self-concept and understanding of parochial role and in the arena of public acceptance. Many people believe that their village priest is the parish priest, even if she is formally assistant clergy, and they then have difficulty in understanding why and how another person, the incumbent, is involved. The village is a difficult arena, both because of the momentum of the traditional model (a priest is a vicar or rector — not many have seen a rural stipendiary curate in training), but also because everything is so visible. But over half of the assistant clergy of the mainland Diocese of Winchester are based in rural parishes, and an even larger percentage of Readers¹⁴.

Deployable? A further question about the role of some assistant clergy is that they are not pastorally so deployable even as stipendiary licenced clergy, because of where they live and have their roots. So their provision is hard to plan in Diocesan terms, though we trust guided by the Holy Spirit. Nor is their development and future path at all clear. Being an assistant clergy may require the giving up of all ambition except to grow in service within the role of a particular benefice.

Towards a Theology of Assistance

In exploring a theology of assistance in the early church, we might remember that St Paul spoke of Timothy as his *co-worker* [Romans 16.21], and Titus as *my partner and co-worker in your service* [2 Corinthians 8.23]. Peter says: *Now as a fellow elder (κοινωνός, sunpresbuteros) myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares (κοινωνός, koinonos) in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you.* [1 Peter 5:1]. The theology of assistance is located in fellowship (κοινωνία, koinonia) and co-working (συνεργία, sunergia).

W H Vanstone writes of the derivation of 'assistance', from the Latin '*adsisto*' which means to stand with a person, being a physical presence to them. "The word 'assistance' is a very physical word: it denotes putting one's body somewhere, giving one's physical presence to someone. And the gift of one's physical presence is, in a sense, unique: it cannot be wholly or adequately replaced by any other gift or any other means of communication. ... physical presence has an existential power which is irresistible and cannot be defined"¹⁵. Assistant clergy (κοινωνός) are a sacramental sign of *κοινωνία*, and therefore of the being of the Holy Trinity, within the overriding sacramental role of the priest in making God's holiness 'findable'¹⁶. The people of the parish are sensitive to hints of defective fellowship between their priests, observing how present they are to each other. A remote relationship avoids the issue by denying the meaning, while a close one raises all the perils of family life — favouritism, jealousy, playing one off against another and diminishing respect with increasing knowledge of faults. Perhaps we play out family life in clergy relationships, because of the large issues, human and divine, we enter and represent.

Assistance is an area where very careful exploration is needed and clarity of understanding of the personal and spiritual issues. Everyone is involved, lay and ordained of every complexion, and there are vested interests at stake. This is more difficult without a firm and theological model of church ministry such as the cure of souls offers, but the licence does not. Help and advice are available in early stages of curacy or incumbency. But the longer term issues of assistance need imagination and reflection on how the concept of cure of souls may be a reality giving direction for all parochial clergy, both those with whom it has been explicitly shared and those ministering on licence as assistant clergy. The nature of assistant ministry can be enriched by a model of ministry and ministerial relationship based upon the cure of souls.

Questions

Would a clearer Diocesan and episcopal policy on assistant clergy help to overcome at least some uncertainties and difficulties in the present situation?

'The concept of the cure of souls is enormously valuable' [note 8]. How can its value be upheld in discussions on the mission of the church?

Might a 'line-management' view of the relationship between Bishop – incumbent – assistant be more acceptable and easier to understand in our culture? Could it have any theological basis?

Could the Bishop when he licences assistant parochial clergy explicitly share with them through the incumbent the cure of souls of the parish(es), without diminishing what was shared with the incumbent at institution? Would that help stabilise and clarify the meaning of assistance?

Assistant clergy work in a great variety of parochial and collegial contexts. Might it not be better to allow these freedom to develop naturally within their individual settings rather than impose a model such as cure of souls?

In the present practice and understanding, does the Bishop see (approve?) the Ministry Agreement between benefice priest and assistant?

Notes

1. "They share with the Bishop in the oversight of the Church, delighting in its beauty and rejoicing in its well-being." *Common Worship Ordinal*, 2006, Bishop's Introduction
2. In the **Instrument of Institution or Collation** the Bishop says, "I invest you with all the rights and duties of the said Benefice and commit to you the Cure of Souls of the Parishioners thereof Saving to the said Bishop and his Successors their Episcopal Rights".
3. John T McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (SCM, 1970) p vii
4. *The Intercession in Holy Communion*: "Give grace, O heavenly Father, to all Bishops and Curates [*the clergy with cure of a parish*], that they may both by their life and doctrine set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly administer thy holy Sacraments;"
5. From the author's Licence, Diocese of Winchester 1999
6. It seems that under Common Tenure all posts will be licensed?
7. Available on www.atpq14.dsl.pipex.com/HantsRural/Reorganisation.pdf .
8. Discussion over the new scheme of common tenure argued that the clergy should remain as office-holders rather than become employees, not least because: "The concept of the cure of souls is enormously valuable, and preserving office holder status ensures that the traditional relationships between priest and people, and priest and bishop are preserved". www.commontenure.org FAQ 5. No other mention of cure of souls is recorded in common tenure legislation.
9. The author estimates there are some 135 assistant clergy in the Diocese of Winchester not of incumbent status, a substantial proportion of the clergy. Of these 52 are curates in training, both stipendiary and self-supporting, in the first four years of ordained ministry.
10. *Review of Clergy Terms of Service*, GS 1527 31 July 2009
11. The introduction of Common Tenure from 2011 makes the position of the assistant curate (whatever they are called, stipendiary or self-supporting) permanent (with exceptions for title posts or time limited appointments).
12. The Diocese of Winchester has a scheme where a proportion of the incumbent's fees may be paid to the assistant clergy for their involvement in pastoral services.
13. There are some self-supporting ministers who are now house-for-duty priest in charge (ie the effective incumbent. SSMs are now expected to be deployable within a reasonable radius.
14. The author's calculation is: 56.3% of assistant clergy in the Diocese are rural, 64.7% of Readers. The definition of rurality is that used by the Government statistical office: settlements of under 10,000 population.
15. W H Vanstone, *Farewell in Christ* (DLT, 1997) pp 116-119
16. Helen Oppenheimer, *Making God Findable* in ed. Giles Ecclestone, *The Parish Church?* (Mowbray, 1988), pp65-78