

## **Clergy Support Trust's 2023 Annual Assembly (AGM)**

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Called on the Mountain to serve on the Plain – Priorities for Ministry Formation

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The immediate context from which I come to reflect with you today is the aftermath at my training institution of what is somewhat euphemistically called a 'PER', or 'Periodic External Review', but might more honestly be termed an inspection. That's certainly what it has felt like, and after many years as a parish priest holding the hands (metaphorically speaking) of many school head teachers as they went through the OFSTED process, I've now had some first-hand experience of what they were really going through. For us, for me, as for all those head teachers, it has been pretty stressful. There has been the stress of the process itself – amassing reams and reams of paperwork, designing and delivering an exhaustive and very complex programme, playing host through the clenched teeth of a rictus grin to the reviewers themselves (who were charming, let me add) – and the stress of the purpose, which feels to be all about being rummaged through and found wanting, entirely irrational and unintended though this impression is.

But there is another aspect to the stress – and this may be something that is particularly resonant for Clergy Support Trust and its trustees and benefactors. This is the extent to which the broader context of the inspection – the wider life of the Church itself – is revealed as anxious, strained and discomfited. This is something of which you will be well aware, not least if (as we have just heard) you are receiving applications for support from no fewer than 20% of stipendiary Church of England clergy. The Church is in a period of evident decline, under-resourced, crippled with institutional (even existential) anxiety and low morale and in the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that its training institutions should be similarly challenged, or that this should show up when we are under the microscope. Just one statistic: the number of ordinands recommended for training this year is some 36% lower than it was three years ago, albeit the actual figure is very slightly up on the even more catastrophic total last year.

It would be tempting to expatiate at this point and for the rest of this talk on the form this stress is taking in my particular world, enlarging on the fact that no one

knows distress like my distress and going all out for the sympathy vote. That, however, would not be becoming. Instead, I'd like, if I may, to reflect with you on what I think may be some of the key priorities for the formation of ministers, the ministers whom you, as the CST, support so generously and so imaginatively. In the context of a threatening world and often anxious and worried church. What is our vocation and how are we to be equipped to be faithful to it?

Christian visitors to Mount Tabor in Galilee, the site traditionally associated with the Transfiguration, may respond to what they find there with a certain wry ruefulness. At the top of the mountain is a great basilica divided into three unevenly matched chapels, one (the largest) for the transfigured Jesus and one each (smaller, and on either side) for Moses and Elijah. Seemingly It seems that Peter, gently mocked as he has been by so many commentators, actually achieved the last laugh. His aspiration was fulfilled: a 'dwelling' in three sections – one for the Lord, one for Moses and one for Elijah – has been constructed on the site.

Peter's instinct was thoroughly ecclesiastical. He aspired to encapsulate a moment, to catch it and build a structure around it so that it could be accessible and capable of being connected with long after the moment itself had passed. The Church is in the business of bridging the eternal and the temporal, bringing the ineffable and uncontainable into the day-to-day reality of human life and experience, building 'dwellings' in which God can be encountered.

But this defence of Peter is not without difficulty. A beautiful flying creature caught in amber may be an object of beauty still, but it no longer flies, and the danger with a project to catch the evanescent and pin it down within structures and liturgies is that the process can itself kill off the very life it seeks to communicate. Worse, the creation of objects of beauty to hold and carry that which intrinsically cannot be wholly held or carried can easily lead to a sort of idolatry in which the vehicle – rather than that which it seeks to convey – becomes the object of devotion and attention.

Upholders of Tradition need to be conscious of this danger and of the countervailing and possibly corrective possibility of 'new' truth and new insight to be discovered and explored. Alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, what we might call 'dwelling-building' voices in the Christian story are those more ready and confident to seek fresh Spirit-inspired revelation in the current moment and to look out for insight and wisdom in sources other than those hallowed by the magisterium of history.

Ideally, of course, there needs to be a conversation – and (inevitably) some tension – between these two instincts and the Church at its best maintains just such a discourse. The discussion between the so-called ‘liberal’ and so-called ‘conservative’, the relatively Charismatic and the more self-consciously Catholic, is one to enrich the community of the faithful as a whole, shaping its shared life of faithfulness. There can be no permanent dwelling in Petrine shelters to enclose and pickle beyond development the experience once given to the saints any more than the truth of God’s revelation can be an entirely unmediated thing, experienced by each isolated believer without reference to the wisdom and reflection of the wider community.

It is in relation to what happens off the mountain that the importance of health in this dialogue is most critical. In the final verse of his famous Transfiguration hymn Joseph A. Robinson prays: ‘Tis good, Lord, to be here | Yet we may not remain; | But since Thou bidst us leave the mount, | Come with us to the plain.’ In the Gospel accounts, the Transfiguration is followed by a messy and gritty encounter on the plain with suffering and need in the shape of a boy possessed by a demon whom the other disciples were unable to cure.<sup>1</sup> Missional engagement – the Good News impacting on human life and the life of the planet – is central to the purpose and calling of the Church and central, therefore, too, to how the Church sets its priorities and looks to its sources of authority. The purpose of that instinct to capture and preserve, to communicate and hand on that which God has given – the instinct that has given us scriptures and sacraments and so much of the paraphernalia of the Church – is, therefore, entirely missional. It also needs to inform at a fundamental level what ministerial formation is all about.

What, then, is the object – the desired outcome – of ministerial formation? What do we want ministers to be competent to do or to be?

Ideally, it is with this question that discussion of methods and priorities in ministry formation should begin. Somewhat worryingly, however, and perhaps with increasing urgency in our times, the discussions start not as far back as this, but rather further down the line. The primary obsession often appears to be with speculation about what kinds of competencies and skill sets ministers need for the current immediate strategic purposes of the Church, rather than anything more visionary or fundamental.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9.14-29, especially vv. 18, 29 and par.

I make no apology for focusing on the question in its more basic form. This must be what gives us the essential orientation for how we are to imagine, plan and resource the business of ministerial and theological education and formation. From that sense of being mountain-called to a plain-based ministry all else must follow, both for ministerial formation and the larger business of building Christian community in all its aspects, including evangelization, catechesis and missional engagement.

Intentional training for ministry and mission in the Church of England is, perhaps surprisingly, not a project with a particularly long history. The first English Theological Colleges were established in the mid-nineteenth century: Chichester in 1839, Wells in 1840 and Cuddesdon (the first to be purpose built) in 1854. All were significantly preceded by other institutions elsewhere in what later came to be known as the Anglican Communion, for instance Bishop's College Kolkata in 1820, Virginia Theological Seminary in 1823 and Codrington College in Barbados, which became exclusively a clergy training institution in 1830, having been endowed as early as 1715 and opened in 1743. It is not my purpose to rehearse this history<sup>2</sup> but it is worth noting that the subject has – pretty much from its inception – been highly contested, both in terms of method, priority, cost and culture. The subject is still contested, and still expensive, but we should probably avoid the detail of that contestation as far as possible this morning.

My concern is contemporary, rather than historical. What should be the priorities and approaches now – in the context of the more timeless vision – to ministerial formation to achieve the best and most productive balance between the building and preserving of Petrine shelters and more pioneering exploration in service of the Gospel? Are there particular approaches, methods and cultures that are or are not particularly well suited to the challenges of our times? What considerations do we need to attach to the question of cost in evaluating our options?

The key distinctive as we reflect on the challenges of our times and culture must be the steady – even precipitous – collapse of what has been called 'Christendom' in the west in recent decades. In 1992, Wesley Carr, with a number of collaborators, produced a book called *Say One for Me*<sup>3</sup> which looked ahead to priorities for the

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<sup>2</sup> For a good introductory summary see Chapman's chapter 'Living the Truth' in Mark D. Chapman (ed.) *Ambassadors for Christ* (Farnham. Ashgate. 2004), which also rehearses and elucidates well much of the background debate on the purpose and shape of theological education for ministry. For more general background on the developing professionalization of the clergy, see also Anthony Russell *The Clerical Profession* (London. SPCK. 1980), especially chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Wesley Carr et al. *Say One for Me: The Church of England in the next decade.* (London. SPCK. 1992)

Church of England in the coming new century. The title aimed to catch a key characteristic of the vocation of the Established Church which the writers believed even then to be under threat. It is a vocation with two distinct but connected aspects that can be labelled the intercessory and the vicarious. A public minister, asked to 'say one' for the person making the request, is being asked both to intercede – to offer prayer for the other's blessing and benefit – and (in a sense) to do the person asking's religion for them, that is vicariously. Central to the role of the national church, the book argues, is a responsibility both to pray for the nation and to do the nation's praying – its religious duty – for it.

Nowadays the so-called Christendom model on which this view rests is by no means any longer self-evident, a much sharper divide having developed between the community of Church and that which is not-Church. Consequently, a new set of skills and aptitudes is required for those who must work across the boundary. There is a renewed emphasis on Mission and Evangelism: the responsibility of the Church of God to engage with the wider world outside itself, to live, proclaim and demonstrate Good News and to bring people into the community of Christ's body. Growing the Church – both its numbers and its impact – has become the highest priority, with Carr's and his colleagues' insights apparently beginning to appear out of date and out of touch, at least to some contemporary commentators and decision-makers.

Whatever the truth of this, it is clear that our battered world and nation are in sore need both of intercession (being prayed for) and of a confident, dynamic model of reconciled, hopeful living within the surrounding chaos.

And so it follows that before all else we need ministers and disciples who are confident of and in the presence of God. In terms of ministerial formation, this demands that the highest priority be given to developing ministers who are men and women of prayer. Private devotion and the cultivation of godly habits of personal prayer, Bible reading and meditation is key to this, as is the practice of corporate worship. This last is of especial importance to public ministers, lay and ordained, who have the responsibility to preach and to minister pastorally in the fractured world we inhabit, as well as to pray for it (in both Carr's senses). Corporate prayer is the habit through which we articulate and explore the reality of God within the cacophony of the world, as well as being the metronome to give shape to communities in which theological reflection and growth are the key shared enterprise.

Alongside the discipline of prayer and worship must be the facility to reflect theologically, to relate lived experience and observation to the wisdom and authority of Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. So there needs to be an essential unity between the spiritual and theological formation of ministerial students – what and how they pray with what and how they learn – that by the grace of God builds awareness of and sensitivity to the God who is faithful in all things.

Currently, there is a strong emphasis on the need for training that is highly focused on the delivery of ‘hard’ skills and competencies. This is understandable (and appropriate) in the post-Christendom age where intentional mission must be prominent, but it may tend towards an unfortunate foregrounding of skill over wisdom, technique over habit. Missionary commitment and practical ministerial capability are not unimportant, of course, but the development of character and personality, and the habitus to give these real rootedness and resilience, is surely considerably more significant. How ministers learn to know themselves and their own God-given, God-loved character and make-up, and to do that with real psychological and spiritual depth and insight is at the heart of formation, rather more so than how to hold the baby at a baptism, organise a Mission effectively, fill in a strategic funding application or sing Compline beautifully (not unimportant as these things may be). With a sometimes quite dark ruefulness, ‘formation’ is often referred to as the only really significant ‘F-word’ in the ordinand’s lexicon and this is revealing. It is through experience and reflection on that experience – self-knowledge – that true growth occurs. The challenge is that whilst this kind of progress can be noticed and celebrated, it is harder to measure and to record in grades and marks to impress bishops, their advisers and (crucially) those making funding decisions about the processes.

For growth in self-knowledge to avoid being merely self-obsessed and hopelessly narcissistic it needs to be enriched and informed by deep theological wisdom. The traditional elements of any programme of ministerial training – serious engagement with the Bible and its languages, Doctrine, Church History, Ethics, Pastoral Theology and the like – are as important as ever they were. Not simply so that we may have clergy who as mere intellectual exercises can knock off a Hebrew gobbet, succinctly rehearse the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ, or rattle through a sophisticated critique of Utilitarianism, but so that they may be faithful and confident in what they teach and how they use such wisdom to relate human experience to the mind of God as the Church has known it. This synthesis of theology and experience – scripture, reason and tradition in the classic formulation – is key to pastoral ministry and (though it is not so often referenced in connection

with this particular phrase) to ‘ministerial effectiveness’, as well. It is as relevant to parish clergy and lay ministers in their daily ministry of leading and growing Church and proclaiming the Gospel as to academic theologians in their particular calling. These things are not easy to measure, however, and so are (again) hard to demonstrate in terms of cost-benefit analysis when it comes to evaluating training programmes or institutions.

The curriculum I have begun to sketch out here could be characterised as fairly traditional. Prayer, public worship, character formation, biblical and doctrinal literacy, self-knowledge and an ability to relate the truths of God to human experience, which is the core of pastoral wisdom and kindness – these things remain fundamental to theological education and to ministerial formation. It also adds up to a frighteningly big project and although it has been reshaped (to a degree) over the years, the overall curriculum has not diminished in scope. Indeed, it has grown: contextual mission, leadership, safeguarding, Black theology (to name but a small handful of recent additions) vie for space on our timetables. And as the demands grow, so the contact time diminishes: no longer is the typical ordinand to be found in a full-time residential capacity for three years, now she is much more likely to be managing her learning and formation on a two-year part-time course alongside paid or unpaid work in the community or the home. Learning contexts have been expanded on many courses to embrace placement settings which extends opportunity but also puts further pressure on formal curriculum delivery.

And further pressure on the individual, too. I have no doubt that our Periodic External Review, when published, will include paragraphs on the pressures and demands laid on our students. The lead reviewer has already indicated that she will be commenting on the unfeasible workload that my staff colleagues are carrying (a comment she made within moments of outlining her recommendation to significantly extend the amount of time we devote to one particular aspect of one-to-one student tuition!).

As I began, so I finish, on the theme of a stressed institution and with a busy (perhaps over-busy) activist programme. I have not dwelt on the detail of the impact of these stresses on the lives of ordinands, clergy and their families – you will know more of this than I do, I suspect. Nor have I attempted to present any kind of manifesto for change – that would take far more time than I have here now (aware that I have already trespassed on your patience). Where I will end, therefore, is with a deep and heartfelt word of thanks on behalf of so many individuals – ordinands that I care for now and clergy for whom I have had responsibility in former years –

whose stressed and often anxious professional lives have been alleviated at crucial times and in moments of real crisis by the charity you represent, and others like you. It is, I firmly believe, Kingdom work. Thank you.