



Ministry to the Parish?

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Introduction

In 1993 I was inducted to the pastoral charge of Cramond Kirk, a large suburban congregation on the north-western outskirts of Edinburgh. Situated on the site of an old Roman fort, Cramond is one of the historic charges in the Church of Scotland. As the parish minister, however, my responsibility was not confined to the members of the congregation but included everyone who lived within Cramond's territorial area or parish.

This expectation arises from the fact that the traditional pattern and practice of ministry within the Church of Scotland embraces the assumption that a minister has a responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of people within a designated area, not just the communicant members of the congregation, and the parish system is designed to enable such a practice of ministry to occur. But given the considerable changes that have taken place in the social and cultural life of Scotland, in working practices, transport and communication, as well as considerable changes in the Church of Scotland, and based on my own experience of ministry in three different parishes, I had long wondered about the continuing validity of the assumption. My doctoral thesis was thus framed around the following question,

To the extent that the parish system of ministry in the Church of Scotland assumes a particular theology and practice of ministry, is it still possible to exercise such a ministry within a parish setting today?



The Parish

A parish is defined as the geographical area around a church for which a minister is responsible in spiritual matters¹ and the Articles Declaratory which describe the constitution of the Church of Scotland



affirm the importance of the parish system as fundamental to both the constitution of the Church of Scotland and its theology and practice of ministry.²

However as is evident in his First Book of Discipline (1560) John Knox sought not only the reform of the church but also of civil society in Scotland. As such Knox recognised the potential of the parish system in promoting his vision of a godly commonwealth in Scotland. The successful development of the parish system of church and ministry cannot be attributed to theological factors alone. The success of men like George Wishart, Patrick Hamilton and John Knox in establishing the Reformation in Scotland lay not just in their religious fervour, their administrative skill, nor their sheer human courage, but can also be attributed in large measure to the fact that their proposed reforms struck a sympathetic chord with the social and cultural mood of the time.³

Duncan Forrester is persuaded that the Scottish reformers were able in significant measure to harness the popular mood for change.

*To a far greater extent than in England or in most continental countries, the Scottish Reformation was a popular movement, a Reformation from below rather than a religious change imposed from above by a Crown in a puzzled and sometimes resistant populace.*⁴

Given this social and cultural context with its desire for reform, and given a theological commitment to a form of ministry that embraced both religious and social need, it is evident that the parish system provided the reformers with an ideal local setting in which such a ministry could be developed.

Parish Ministry Called into Question

The practice of parish ministry in post-Reformation Scotland thus developed with a concern for the eternal salvation of an individual's soul set alongside a concern for the justice and well-being of Scottish

society. It resulted in what Storrar has described as *a theological tradition in Scotland which was concerned with questions of justice in society as much as with justification by faith.* ⁵

Such a tradition has proved to be the bedrock not only of the Church of Scotland but also much of Scotland's civic life. The historical records of innumerable Kirk Sessions indicate the enormous influence that ministers and elders exerted over local community life while the records of many local government councils demonstrate the extent to which their structures and boundaries were influenced by the parish system.

However, while it is important to recognise the historical significance of the parish system of ministry, a different perspective is emerging, one which calls into question the continuing effectiveness of the geographical parish system as the appropriate setting for the practice of ministry.

Robin Gill has argued passionately that the continuing adherence to what he describes as *medieval parish boundaries* must be changed if the church is to engage in effective ministry in Scotland. While Gill concedes that parish boundaries may still be meaningful in rural areas in defining not just the physical boundaries of an area but the social and cultural boundaries in which a community of people live, work and enjoy their leisure time, the same cannot be argued for the towns and cities of Scotland. ⁶

Gill's thesis is not that the Church of Scotland should abandon its claim to being the national church nor its commitment to providing the ordinances of the Christian religion to the people of Scotland. Instead he argues that while it will be important for denominations to think geographically at a central level, the focus at the local level must be on natural communities rather than inflexible geographical areas. Embracing new social and cultural boundaries is in his view the only way for the church to continue to have a role in the public life of the nation as well as the religious life of some of its citizens.



The Face of My Parish

One of the classic texts on parish ministry in the 20th century is Tom Allan's *The Face of my Parish*.⁷ Ordained into the ministry of the Church of Scotland in 1946, Allan served for seven years as the minister of the congregation of North Kelvinside in Glasgow. During that time the Kirk Session and congregation embarked upon a programme of parish visitation. The results were dramatic. Hundreds of new members flocked to join the congregation, many of them joining the church for the first time by profession of faith.

As Allan documents in his book, however, what the visitation also revealed was that a largely gathered congregation had lost touch with its parish community. Whereas shortly after his appointment Allan had felt something akin to hostility as he had walked around his parish, he came to realise that the real hostility was from the gathered congregation towards the community in which it worshipped. The prevailing social and cultural values of the congregation recognised very different boundaries from those of its territorial parish area. Allan concluded that there no longer existed in North Kelvinside what David Fergusson so elegantly summarised as

*that alliance of church, state and civil society in terms of a comprehensive Christian vision characteristic of the continental Reformed tradition.*⁸

While *The Face of my Parish* records a short but dramatic period in the life of one Church of Scotland congregation, it also gives an insight into the emerging gap between the expectation and the experience of parish ministry some fifty years ago. The breakdown of that *comprehensive Christian vision* is partly to be found in changes that took place in the church but can also be accounted for by changes and developments in the social and cultural landscape of Scotland.





A Changed and a Changing Church

Of the many changes to affect the Church of Scotland and its practice of ministry since the Reformation, one of the most significant has been the Disruption. The history of the Disruption is well documented and there is no need for me to rehearse it here ⁹ other than to note Will Storrar's forthright conclusion that the Disruption sounded the death knell of the Scottish Reformed vision of a godly commonwealth, its ideal of a national church operating through its network of parishes with a theologically informed understanding of ministry which embraced both spiritual and social need.¹⁰

Despite the Disruption, the parish system continued to provide the setting for the Church's practice of ministry with its expectation of meeting the social and cultural as well as the religious needs of a community of people. However equally significant changes were taking place in the social and cultural landscape of Scotland, changes that have also impacted on the effectiveness of the parish system of ministry.



A Changed and a Changing Scotland

The sociologist David McCrone has described the changing social and cultural landscape of Scotland in terms of the transition from modernity to post-modernity.¹¹ To the extent McCrone is accurate in his analysis, the value of understanding this social and cultural shift for the practice of ministry in the Church of Scotland cannot be overestimated. While there is much evidence to suggest that the Church of Scotland adapted its systems and structures to become a typically modern institution,¹² the question now is whether the Church can demonstrate a similar flexibility in response to a new social and cultural environment.



Field Research

A Qualitative Research programme based on a series of interviews was designed as the principal form of data collection for the research. This interview data was supplemented by statistical evidence about



the distribution of ministers into different forms of ministry in the Church of Scotland from 1958 until 1998 (the latest figures available). The statistical information was gathered from the official records and reports of the Church of Scotland, the overall purpose of the research being to gather evidence on the impact of the parish system of ministry upon the actual practice of ministry as experienced by a variety of people involved in ministry within the Church of Scotland.

Conclusions of Research

Based on the evidence gleaned from the research, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Where once a 'settled church' could minister to a 'settled community', a system of ministry based upon a fixed geographical area lacks the flexibility to respond to a social and cultural situation characterised by mobility and choice.
2. In order to be faithful to the breadth of the Reformed vision of ministry, the Church of Scotland has created a variety of specialist chaplaincy ministries (industrial, hospital, university, prison, military) but such chaplaincies have been developed without reference to the parish system.
3. The creation of these specialised forms of ministry has promoted a two tier form of ministry with chaplaincy not only divorced from congregational life but often excluded from the predominantly parish-based business of Presbytery and General Assembly, something quite at odds with the theological traditions of the Scottish Reformers' commitment to the one ministry of Christ.
4. To the extent that chaplaincy ministry is divorced from the parish system and congregation life, it has contributed to the loss of the corporate understanding of ministry embraced by the Reformed vision.

5. Based on the assumption that the normal cycle of life would bring people in touch with the parish church, the evidence suggests, for example, that given the changes in transport and employment, such contact can no longer be assumed.
6. A system of ministry based upon a fixed territorial area takes no account of the ecumenical or multi-faith dimension of Scotland's religious landscape.

Taken together these factors lend weight to the conclusion that while the parish system of ministry continues in theory to provide the ordinances of religion and pastoral care, in practice the role, expectation and experience of parish ministry is that it no longer addresses the issues of civic life and reform to which Knox and the Scottish reformers were committed. In short the 'parish form' of ministry is being restricted by the 'parish system'. What is needed is what Thomas Kuhn¹³ would describe as a new 'paradigm' of ministry, that is, a different way of describing to the church how to fulfill its commitment to the Reformed vision of ministry. If such a new pattern of ministry is to emerge, one that replaces the paradigm of the parish system, let me indicate what I believe to be some of its essential characteristics.

Theological Considerations

The concept of parish ministry was a practical expression of the Scottish reformers' commitment to bring the love and promises that God revealed in Jesus Christ to bear on the religious and social needs of the people of Scotland. These theological roots remain important for they continue to nourish the important Reformed principle that the practice of ministry is always conducted in reference to the continuing ministry of Christ. When empowered by his Spirit, the church seeks to be faithful to his command to go out into all the world to preach good news to the poor and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

The Reformed understanding of the practice of ministry has been further shaped by its understanding of baptism. Each baptised person is called to share in Christ's ministry and to make responsible use of

the gifts and talents with which they have been entrusted. I believe that a renewed understanding of the relationship between baptism and ministry will be critical to this development and will be the first characteristic of the new paradigm. Examining these implications and renewing the Reformed theological relationship between baptism and ministry will be one of the significant theological issues for the practice of ministry in the postmodern era in Scotland.

This is not to undermine the role of the person ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament in helping to build and sustain communities of faith. Instead it is a recognition of the importance of the Christian witness of each person in their local situation and everyday life. So the first characteristic of the new paradigm is that its patterns of ministry will be characterised by collaboration, Christian people working in partnership in a variety of community and chaplaincy settings, each exercising their distinctive gifts and calling as part of the one ministry of Christ.



Cultural Considerations

In an essay seeking to explore the identification of culture as a theological concept, J Heywood Thomas makes the point that we simply don't have a choice in the matter. We are all people of a particular time and place and carry with us a particular set of social and cultural expectations.¹⁴ To the extent that this is true, I believe that Thomas' point about the dynamic relationship between theology, culture and the practice of ministry is one that has still to be fully grasped by the Church of Scotland.

The parish system as defined in terms of a fixed territorial area provided the Scottish reformers with a blueprint for the practice of ministry throughout Scotland. Given the changed and changing social and cultural context in which Scotland now finds itself, one can anticipate that no such new blueprint will emerge. Instead I anticipate that diversity of practice will be the second characteristic of the new paradigm of ministry



For an organisation like the Church of Scotland which has operated with a parish pattern intended to fit all times and places, it will inevitably find such diversity messy and untidy. So be it. In fact it is little more than a recognition that ministry is already being practised in a variety of different settings. In a postmodern context, untidiness and the lack of an overall structure or blueprint for the practice of ministry may prove to be a virtue rather than a failing.

Ecumenical Considerations

Irrespective of the 2003 General Assembly's reaction to the SCIFU proposals, the third characteristic of the new paradigm will be its ecumenicity. The claim enshrined in the Articles Declaratory that as the national church the Church of Scotland is representative of the Christian faith of the people of Scotland can no longer be substantiated with any degree of credibility. Neither is it credible to claim that the parish minister has the role of providing the ordinances of religion to all the people of the parish. Clearly there are many Scottish Christians for whom the Church of Scotland is not an expression of their faith. And in an increasingly multicultural society, there are many Scots who would express commitment to a different religious tradition and who would also reject the claim of the Church of Scotland to represent their faith.

With regard to the ecumenical dimension of ministry there is also evidence to support McCrone's analysis that what he described as lower case religious activity is flourishing in Scotland around single or particular issues. For example, over eighty Christian congregations in Edinburgh support 'Fresh Start', a project concerned with alleviating the evil of homelessness in Scotland's capital city. The success of 'Fresh Start' in attracting such wide support not just from the churches but from the public sector is due in no small measure to the fact that it is ecumenically based. Given that one of the features of the prevailing cultural condition of Scotland is a loosening of the ties of denominational loyalty, I believe that this ecumenical dimension will be critical to the effective practice of ministry into the future.



Social Considerations

Given the political commitment of the Church of Scotland to being the national church, it will continue to be important for future patterns of ministry to retain a territorial commitment of making the ordinances of religion available to all the people of Scotland. What is clear, however, is that in a postmodern social context, this commitment will need to be addressed in a different way. The value of the parish system for the practice of ministry was that the parish represented the physical area in which a community of people lived and worked. While the Church of Scotland was able to adapt this rural model for the practice of ministry into the era of modernity, the rapid changes that have affected life styles and working practices in the latter part of the twentieth century in Scotland simply render the geographically parish model redundant. As part of an international community in terms of employment, transport, communication and information technology, Scotland can no longer be described socially or economically in terms of parish areas.

While there will always be a need for a locally based pastoral ministry to support people in need, or comfort them in situations of bereavement and loss, the task facing the church is not the administrative task of redrawing boundaries, it is the theological task of imagining new forms and practices that will enable the practice of ministry to continue to address religious and social concerns. So the fourth characteristic of the new paradigm is that it will develop systems of ministry defined socially and culturally rather than geographically.

What remains hopeful, however, and what developing patterns of ministry can build upon, is that public institutions like hospitals, prisons and universities, and many companies within the industrial sector, are willing to recognise that there is a spiritual dimension to life. The evidence of the field study and the growth in the number of chaplaincy arrangements suggests that this will be a fruitful area for the church to develop ministry in response to the social and cultural changes of a postmodern environment.



A Church for Scotland

Having outlined what I believe to be some of the features that will characterise the future practice of ministry in Scotland, I must now draw the obvious conclusion, namely that what I envisage developing is a church for Scotland rather than a Church of Scotland. I believe that the evidence of the field study supports my conviction that when defined in geographical terms, parish based ministry is no longer capable of sustaining the ministry commitments of the Scottish reformers in Scotland's postmodern cultural environment. To the extent to which that is true, it also remains true that while the church can no longer claim to represent the faith of the people of Scotland, it is still committed to presenting faith in Christ to the people of Scotland.

This recalls the proposal of Robin Gill that such a church should retain a national commitment to ministry in terms of mission and pastoral care. Aware of the distinctiveness of its own Christian roots, this church would continue to uphold its passion for justice and its concern for the needs of the poor, the homeless and the deprived in Scotland and elsewhere. It would be a community of people who in worship and service were faithful to and representative of Jesus Christ, not a sect concerned with their own salvation, but one that remained true to the breadth of the Scottish reformed vision of a godly commonwealth.

While the parish system has served Scotland's church and people well, new patterns for the practice of ministry are now needed that the one ministry of Christ might continue to be exercised. Developing such new patterns is a task worthy of a reformed and a reforming Church.

- ¹ *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996
- ² The third Article declares that the Church of Scotland considers itself to be 'a national Church representative of the Christian Faith of the Scottish people (which) acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry'.

- ³ See for example Sir David Lindsay's *'Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites'* a play which denounces the oppression and exploitation of the nobility and makes an impassioned plea for the purification and reform of both church and state.
- ⁴ Duncan Forrester, "Ecclesia Scoticana" in *Theology* (March/April 1999), 806.
- ⁵ William Storrar *Scottish Identity*, Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1990, argues that the Reformed theological tradition in Scotland rejected any kind of division between the spiritual and the secular and embraced an understanding of ministry concerned with the divinely ordained state as well as the divinely predestined human soul
- ⁶ Robin Gill *Beyond Decline*, London: SCM, 1998, 115ff
- ⁷ Tom Allan, *The Face of my Parish*, Glasgow: Loudon Publications, 1984
- ⁸ David Fergusson "The Kirk and its contribution to Scottish Identity" in *Theology in Scotland*, Vol 5 no 2 , 1998
- ⁹ see A C Cheyne *The Ten Years Conflict & The Disruption*, Edinburgh:Scottish Academic Press, 1993
- ¹⁰ Storrar, *Scottish Identity*, p.43
- ¹¹ David McCrone "The Post-modern Condition of Scottish Society" in *Theology in Scotland* (Occasional Paper no 2: "The Future of the Kirk", 1997), p.14
- ¹² see Will Storrar's paper in response to David McCrone's paper also in *Theology in Scotland* (Occasional Paper no 2)
- ¹³ See Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago:The University of Chicago Press, 1963. Kuhn was interested in the way that scientific theory was formed and in particular the process by which one theory replaced another. In order to explain this process Kuhn devised his model of different paradigms.
- ¹⁴ J Heywood Thomas "Identification of Culture as a Theological Concept" in Peter McEnhill and G B Hall, eds., *The Presumption of Presence*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1996, 136