



Preparing for enabling the ministries of the Church: Where are we and where do we want to be?

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When the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland [= CofS] in 2008 instructed the Ministries Council to conduct a thorough review of the training processes for which it is responsible, the Council decided to begin that task by considering what the theological foundations were upon which training should be based. This theological work was not done in a vacuum: the Board of Ministry (a predecessor of the Council) having in 2000 written a widely discussed report entitled “Ministers of the Gospel”.² That document reiterated the Reformed emphasis on ministry of the church as nothing other than a variety of expressions of the *one* ministry of Jesus Christ. It also acknowledged that the exercise of the recognised ministries of the church (and the ministry of Word and Sacrament in particular) takes place within the wider ministry of the *whole* people of God. The Council’s current on-going review process takes those two premises as a given and seeks to build on them in considering how best to enable ministers [1] to fulfil their vocation, and [2] to become people who enable the wider ministry of all God’s people.

The title of the resulting theological foundations paper – “Enabling Ministries” – self-evidently reflects this dual intention. It implies that the preparation of people for ministries is not only about the initial training of *parish* ministers (the pivotal and dominant formal ministry role within the Church of Scotland), but also about ensuring that those who exercise a formal ministry function are equipped to participate in preparing *all* God’s people for ministry. For the first time ever, therefore, the review of training has undertaken the task of looking not only at initial ministerial formation processes, but also at the way these connect to life-long learning patterns for those in ministry. It is hoped that this overall work, when completed in 2013, will allow

a more holistic policy to be implemented in relation to the regular developmental needs of those engaged in all the recognised ministries of the church.³ For the purposes of this brief paper, however, we will focus particularly on the process for initial training of full-time ministers of Word and Sacrament [= MWS], since it is that which most affects parish ministry.

The commissioning of the current Training Review presupposes at least that there may be room for improvement in the effectiveness of the current provision. It does not imply that what is being done now is substandard or careless. Like much of life in the early twenty-first century, the world of education and training is experiencing rapid change, much of it driven more by financial constraints than higher ideals and often without time to reflect on its appropriateness or wider consequences. The Council has sought, by taking the time to prepare the “Enabling Ministries” document, to begin by considering theological foundations which then lead to the identification of key principles. In the second part of this paper we shall consider those principles in some detail as pointers to the future.



Where are we?

The current pattern of training for MWS rests on two main building blocks: [1] the successful completion of a theological degree validated and taught at one of the recognised institutions;⁴ [2] a series of four placements (two part-time of 25 weeks duration each; one full-time summer placement of 10 weeks; a 15 month full-time Probationary placement), participation in five Candidates’ Conferences (prior to the fourth placement) and four Probationers’ Conferences, all of which elements are organised and overseen by the Council.

In addition, the last couple of years has seen the development of a Ministries Training Network [= MTN] which regularly (about six times a year) brings together candidates for all ministries on a regional basis for a couple of hours. The MTN meetings enable candidates to engage with experienced ministers in a number of activities including: worship (led by candidates); sharing verbatims or other material from a journal which each keeps throughout the year; theological

reflection on pastoral practice based on case studies provided from current placement experience; discussion of common reading material relating to pastoral ministry. The MTN is organised by staff of the Council and facilitated by trained and experienced supervisors. In its current shape, it is not resourced by the colleges, though the Master of Christ's College, Rev J. H. A Dick, who is a full-time parish minister and supervisor, has led the Aberdeen group.

All of these elements have much to commend them. What is lacking, however, is an overall coherent strategy to enable thorough integration of the parts. Whereas all of the church colleges and university faculties were once staffed by a number of ministers from the CofS and other denominations, this is no longer the case. While each in its own way provides some opportunity for worship, informal learning and social contact (including in some cases retreats or extended field trips), there is no regular or sustained opportunity for structured theological reflection (*see commentary below on the first principle*).⁵ This means that such reflection, which the Council sees as fundamental to best practice in formation for ministry, remains an activity provided amongst others at conferences and MTN meetings, rather than being the integrative thread which holds the *whole* formation process (intellectual, practical, spiritual) together.

Reflection on practice, including the validation of placements, is a common element in a number of degree courses nowadays in all universities. Perhaps the best-known examples are the degree courses with validated supervision and assessment of placements for teachers and nurses. Both of these professions require sustained exposure to practice in order to prepare candidates for work and both endeavour to link initial training to an on-going requirement for personal appraisal and in-service development. The Council's current review process is examining what lessons may be learned for ministries training using such an integrated approach.

As we turn to the question of where we might want to be in terms of future training we shall consider in more detail where some of the current good practice might be further reinforced and developed, as well as looking at areas where new approaches are worth exploring.



Where do we want to be?

Having begun the current Training Review by a process of careful reflection on theological foundations, the Council then proceeded to derive a series of key principles from the resulting document (“Enabling Ministries”). These will guide the shaping of programmes for training in the future. They were received by the General Assembly in 2010 and are listed below.⁶ In trying to outline where the future path of training may be going, we shall use these principles as theses on which a short commentary is offered.

1. *Theological training for ministries should be delivered in a manner whereby the intellectual, practical and spiritual elements of formation are held together in balance and fully integrated. At all times it will seek to model patterns which are collaborative, reflective and formative.*

To date initial training has been treated in a more compartmentalised way than it might be. The “Ministers of the Gospel” report already recognised this in its outline profile of ministers, which emphasised the need for MWS to be collaborative in engagement, reflective on practice and committed to an on-going formative process.⁷ Such habits do not emerge by chance, but require intentional modelling from the outset in training.

The current initial training process almost entirely relies on the Candidates’ Conferences and the MTN meetings to find space for candidates to engage in structured theological reflection – that is, facilitated peer group work in which insights from theological reading, placement experience and spiritual life are integrated. As long as this is seen and modelled as lying outside of the ‘academic’ course, a false distinction is made between ‘practical’ and ‘intellectual’ development.⁸ For this reason, a key feature of future training should be that the reflective cycle be an underpinning principle of *all* aspects of formation, including being built into the university course structure. While that course will continue to be the main focus for a participant’s intellectual development, it should also provide the opportunity to integrate and model reflective practice. This would not only better

enable candidates to develop as reflective practitioners, but also signal the *value* which is placed upon reflective practice by Church and Academy alike.

There is no implication here that either the current Candidates' Conferences or the university degree courses are lacking in quality – far from it. The excellent material in both, however, needs to be better integrated to allow the maximum potential for formation of candidates as well-integrated and suitably equipped reflective practitioners. If that is achieved, the ability of MWS to adapt to the fast-changing world in which we live will be significantly enhanced and with it the potential of the church to engage more effectively in the mission of Christ.

- 2. Those engaging in training for ministries should be preparing to work ecumenically and the content of programmes of training must reflect this. Alongside this, candidates for ministries should be enabled to understand better their Reformed origins and their identity within the Church of Scotland.*

It has long been assumed that by studying within the university context, candidates are automatically exposed to a broad ecumenical spectrum during training, not only in terms of denominations, but also of faiths and philosophies. While there will inevitably be some unstructured, informal learning in this area, there has been until now little *intentionality* in relation to ecumenical living. In a social context where Christianity is no longer anywhere near being at the centre of Scottish life and where denominationalism is an irrelevance to the vast majority of the population, there is a two-fold need in training: [a] to ensure that broad ecumenical engagement is discovered as a way of *being* (not an optional extra) for those in ministry; [b] to enable ministers to feel sufficiently confident of their own origins and identity as to lose the fear of others who express their faith and belief in different ways.

This requires more than unstructured assimilation of the economy of the university – it needs a commitment to building relationships with others who think and act differently. As with integration, what we signal in the training process will significantly influence what can be expected in the on-going practice of ministry. This must have

implications for the future shape of the MTN, where an opportunity exists to develop partnership with ministries candidates from other denominational backgrounds. It is a simple fact that *none* of the denominations in Scotland (the CofS included) has a large enough body of folks training for ministries to warrant duplication of activity. There is a real opportunity to change positively the future shape of ecumenical commitment and community in Scotland, by enabling intentional relationship-building in the initial formation process for ministries candidates (of *all* varieties of ministry).

3. *Training patterns for recognised ministries should always complement patterns for wider theological training of all God's people, requiring the Ministries Council to work in close partnership with the Mission & Discipleship Council in respect of this.*

If we are to take seriously the oft-repeated assertion that MWS takes place within the wider ministry of all God's people, then it is crucial that future patterns of training are brought into a closer relationship with the training processes offered to the wider constituency of the church. In CofS terms, this falls under the remit of the Mission and Discipleship Council [= M&D]. The closure of the Scottish Churches Open College in 2003 removed a significant ecumenical resource through which such a connection might have been made. The future here, therefore, connects closely to the two previous principles (integration, ecumenical breadth) and points to the need for some connected thinking not only internal to the CofS structures, but also across the churches to find ways of resourcing a broad spectrum of enabling for people of God.

There is much also to be learned from the world church in this area – so the discussion of the way forward in relation to this principle needs also to look beyond the boundaries of Scotland. There are significant financial resource issues here, since the current CofS budget for training candidates for MWS (less than 90 people in total) is more than the *entire* budget available to M&D in 2011 (supporting a congregational membership of nearly 460,000!).⁹ Whatever the solution to this may be, the CofS Councils will be seeking to work

much more closely in the coming years to ensure that the *principles* underpinning training for the recognised ministries of the church are coherent with those informing the wider training agenda.

4. *All patterns of training should aim at fostering a learning community, engendering modes of collaborative working and resisting any tendency to isolate an individual in study. All programmes of training will aim for the highest standards in intellectual and practical engagement.*

The importance of learning in community is not a new theme – indeed, the existence of church colleges is a sign that this has long been recognised as a crucial element in the formation process. The nature of these colleges in terms of the CofS has altered greatly over the past fifty years. Where once the Divinity Faculties (as they then were) were staffed in large measure by ordained ministers (predominantly CofS) who also formed the staff of the colleges, the modern theology departments in the four ancient universities have between them four CofS ministers who are full-time staff members. This is not to plead vainly that the clock be turned back, but to recognise that the nature of the experience of college life for CofS ministries candidates has changed. No longer can it be assumed that a learning community is formed simply by the existence of a church college.

Each of the colleges, including the Highland Theological College in Dingwall, which was validated as an academic provider for CofS candidates in 2007, has in its own way sought to adapt to the new reality. The Ministries Council has also become more intentional in creating a regular place of connection for all its ministries through the MTN. There is much still to be explored in this, however, and it might involve both a significantly greater integration of the MTN with the colleges and an ecumenical broadening out of its scope.

5. *Opportunity needs to be given to candidates for training in specialist ministries, recognising the necessity for all candidates for ministries to be trained for ministry which is mission-centred.*

One of the distinctive marks of the CofS is its commitment as the

national church to a territorial ministry. This was reaffirmed as recently as 2010 by the General Assembly, albeit with the rightful recognition of the need for a much greater ecumenical partnership in carrying out that role. The General Assembly in 2011 also affirmed the description of the parish ministry as the *pivotal* expression of ministry for the CofS. There is clear indication, therefore, that training for the full-time MWS will remain core business for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, the need for the church to refocus its ministries on *mission* has been a key emphasis of the move towards sustainable ministries outlined as part of the *2020 Vision* articulated by the Ministries Council and agreed by the General Assembly.¹⁰ Given that 90% of Scots rarely (if ever) come into contact with the institutional church, the need to move out beyond the walls to meet with people and share the Gospel story is paramount. While that is certainly part of the role of parish ministry, the whole Emerging Church movement points to the opportunities which may arise for some specialist ministries, whether full-time or part-time, stipendiary or non-stipendiary. An example from other places would be what is often called *pioneer* ministry, which is directed towards the establishing of new communities of faith, for instance in areas where large new housing developments are taking place. Future training will want to leave the flexibility to offer specialist training for those who sense a vocation to this kind of role, perhaps as a supplementary element to the core work relating to MWS (parish ministry), or as part of training for Ordained Local Ministry.

6. *Candidates for all ministries should be enabled to exercise leadership with integrity, courage and open-heartedness.*

As noted earlier, the principles outlined here are in continuity with those which have underpinned training rather than being either a completely new direction or a critique of past practice. It is self-evident that integrity, courage and open-heartedness are characteristics sought in those who serve in ministry and mission in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. What may be slightly different in this description is the emphasis on exercising *leadership*. Some experienced parish ministers today express the view that their calling was to preach the

Word and administer the Sacraments, rather than to exercise leadership in the church. The “Ministers of the Gospel” report noted that one outcome of the survey conducted as part of its preparation was ‘the overwhelming message that [...] the only sustainable future for ministry lies in continuing the development of collaborative patterns. This is expressed most strongly in the form of team ministry’.¹¹

Team ministry requires leadership and that responsibility will of necessity lie with those in whom the church invests training. This is something which should be owned and articulated in relation to future patterns of training.

7. *Training for ministries requires active and on-going dialogue with academic partners and to that end, an effective interactive forum needs to be established.*

This seems a fairly obvious statement, but the church has been remiss in fostering such an active relationship over many years. In recent times, at the initiative of the Master of Christ’s College, Aberdeen, some initial steps have been taken to create a Church-Academy Forum. It is to be hoped that this will develop in the years ahead to reinvigorate active theological reflection between those who provide the primary intellectual resources for candidates in training and their counterparts charged with the oversight of training on behalf of the churches. Two things to note here would be: [a] the emphasis on *churches* rather than simply the CofS (another reminder of the need for intentionality in ecumenical relations); [b] the reminder that what we *model* will significantly influence the effectiveness of the end product of training. If those responsible for training are engaging actively in reflective practice, there is greater authenticity in requiring such activity in candidates!

8. *Close attention should be given to the way in which those engaged in supervision, mentoring and accompaniment are themselves selected and trained for the work of supporting candidates in training for ministries.*

The supervision of candidates on placement is both a special privilege

and significant responsibility, especially when the emphasis on modelling good practice already underlined in these principles is taken into account. There have been big changes in the support and training given to supervisors in recent years and this now includes a selection process to identify those best suited to the role. A formal initial training process has been introduced for new supervisors and this is backed up with on-going training for those already engaged in the task. Those who supervise will themselves demonstrate the three key characteristics of being collaborative, reflective and formative in their practice of ministry.

Supervisors belong to the community of learning and are companions with candidates on the journey of discovery in ministry. There is scope for further development in offering accreditation to those who train for the task of supervision, in parallel to other professions such as teaching and nursing. This is something which ought to be explored further with academic providers.

9. *Training for ministries must be seen as a lifelong task for those engaged in ministries and should be integrated with a process of personal appraisal and development.*

On the face of it this principle will seem obvious and straightforward, not least to those engaged in one of the professions. Sadly, however, it remains controversial in the context of the church. A false dichotomy has been created by some between the terms ‘vocational’ and ‘professional’ in relation to ministries, as though to be professional in one’s approach to ministry were to deny a sense of calling. We need to move beyond this and recognise that being in *community* requires a degree of accountability not only to God, but also to one another. This relies upon building up relationships of trust between those who are living out their vocation, moving away from defensiveness or worse still competitiveness. There is little point in developing initial training on the basis of the first principle outlined above if there is no commitment to on-going mutual support and accountability.

Part of the challenge here will be to understand ‘appraisal’ as a positive mechanism of support and an opportunity both to reinforce

existing skills and develop new ones. No other major professional body today lacks an appraisal, learning and development process – it is an *entitlement* for employees which employers are legally obliged to provide. The church is committed to extending to ministers (as office holders) rights equivalent to employment, so this needs urgently and positively to be addressed. Once again, there is scope here for closer partnership with both academic providers and ecumenical partners.

10. *Training for ministries should be delivered in as flexible and accessible a manner as possible using a variety of delivery modes (including distance learning, part-time and full-time options).*

Training for MWS has been to this point a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, with candidates for full-time service required to study on a full-time basis, living close to one of the five centres where academic providers are located. This inevitably places restriction on the accessibility of training for some groups of people, depending on their life circumstances or those of their partners and families. The value of learning in community has been emphasised, but there is more than one way of enabling this to happen and more creative thought needs to be given to ways in which this can be engendered, even if the majority of candidates still opt for a more traditional full-time course structure.

In some English college contexts, courses have been designed and running for many years now which allow participants to register as ‘full-time’, but to attend courses over a concentrated period (for example, on two consecutive days with one overnight stay). With some imagination in planning, these courses also allow for the regular meeting together of candidates in a reflective community, significantly increasing their sense of togetherness and vocational motivation.

11. *A clear path, including additional training requirements, needs to be mapped out to provide for movement between the various ministries which the Church recognises.*
12. *An on-going dialogue needs to be established between the planning and deployment function of the Council and vocation*

and training, enabling the development of selection and training patterns which take into account the changing demographics of Scotland.

These two principles are included for completeness and both have important internal implications for the CofS. In terms of space, however, we will refrain from further discussion of them here.

This is but a short commentary on the principles which the General Assembly has commended for the future of ministries training in the CofS and it has concentrated on initial training, particularly for full-time MWS. The long-term goal remains, however, to ensure that the good work already being done in our universities, colleges, conferences and networks is developed in such a way as to enable those who serve in the recognised ministries of the church more effectively to engage in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. To that end, a focused commitment to connect ‘head, hands and heart’ through a well-developed cycle of theological reflection needs to lead not only to changes in the initial processes of training, but over time to the seamless integration of that crucial first stage with the on-going learning and development which the Gospels portray Jesus himself as modelling for those who minister in his footsteps.

Notes

- 1 The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author. Dr Scott is Secretary of the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland, has been closely involved in the drafting of the paper “Enabling Ministries”, and draws directly on material approved by that body and by the General Assembly. This is, however, a personal view of the current situation and not a policy paper seen or agreed by the Council.
- 2 “Ministers of the Gospel”, *Reports to the General Assembly 2000*, Report of the Board of Ministry, section 2.

- 3 The recognised ministries of the CofS are the Ministry of Word and Sacrament (both full-time parish ministry and the non-stipendiary Ordained Local Ministry [formerly called Auxiliary Ministry, this name being retained by some]); the Diaconate and the Readership. In addition, there are numerous forms of Chaplaincy, some of which may be exercised by people trained for any of those ministries.
- 4 There are currently five validated academic providers: the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews, each of which has a church college attached (respectively, Christ’s College, New College, Trinity College and St Mary’s College); and the Highland Theological College (Dingwall), which is a constituent college of the University of the Highlands and Islands.
- 5 Trinity College, Glasgow, together with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies (part of the School of Critical Studies) within the University of Glasgow, has over the past year been piloting a new and more integrative degree course for candidates in training, which includes regular weekly worship and the opportunity for candidates, staff and visiting preachers to eat together.
- 6 *Reports to the General Assembly 2010*, p. 3/18. For the purposes of this paper, numbering has been added for ease of reference and the order of the principles has been slightly amended to group together some practical internal principles relating to function (here numbered 10–12) from the wider foundational elements.
- 7 “Ministers of the Gospel”, section 2.4.
- 8 This is self-evidently a false distinction, since the conference programme engages participants intellectually and the university course also involves development of practical skills alongside a primary intellectual focus.
- 9 The congregational role statistics at 31 December 2009, the latest figures, indicate a membership of 459,692. The budget set aside by the Ministries Council for candidate training in 2011 is just under £2M; for the Mission and Discipleship Council as a whole just under £1.9M; and for the World Mission Council – the CofS link to the world Church – around £3.5M.

- 10 2020 Vision has four key elements: Priority Areas Action Plan – aiming to create a more just and equitable society; Training Review – equipping ministries personnel for the future; A Place for Hope – transforming the culture from destructive conflict to reconciliation through mediation; and Sustainable Ministries – planning for mission with purpose, variety and financial responsibility.
- 11 “Ministers of the Gospel”, section 2.3.4.1.