

Theological Reflections on Rural Chaplaincy

Malcolm Brown 13 November 2009

My own background in ministry includes some time in chaplaincy although my ministry has been suburban and urban rather than rural. I was, through most of the 1980s, an industrial mission and parish priest in Southampton where I was also a very part time hospital chaplain. I then spent ten years at the William Temple Foundation in Manchester where one of my responsibilities was training industrial missionaries and community workers. As Principal of the East Anglian Ministerial training Course I had a good deal to do with rural benefices in the region, but not with chaplaincy as such. Now, at MPA, I am responsible for a review of health care chaplaincy as well as working with colleagues in the rural and urban contexts. So my experience is mixed but does not overlap precisely with yours. Some of what I say, therefore, is said in ignorance, although I hope I may be able to make some worthwhile connections.

It seems worth looking for a moment at the antecedents of the idea of chaplaincy. Originally, the chaplain was a priest employed to pray for the souls of a particular person or family. A kind of private mass-sayer. This might be taken to imply that some people are just too grand to go to church like the rest so the church must come to them. I think we might also see here a mediaeval insight that will sound odd to modern ears – that wealth and power constituted grave spiritual danger so those who had wealth and power required, as it were, extra spiritual support. So there, already, we may have two prototype models of chaplaincy – the church going to those who cannot or will not go to church, and the provision of spiritual resources to those most in need of them.

But looking at the last 70 years or so, one can see how those, and other, models of chaplaincy have developed in ways which don't seem to me to be well thought through.

First, chaplaincy is sometimes justified in terms of taking the church to those who can't get to church in the normal way. Prison chaplaincy and maybe hospital chaplaincy fits this mould. In 1990 I was part of an Church of England delegation to the Anglo-Scandinavian Pastoral Conference in Norway and we met members of the Norwegian Industrial Mission working on the North Sea oil rigs. Someone asked whether there would have been an Industrial Mission if oil had been found on land – and this provoked some surprise. Of course not, they said, why would we need a mission if the workers could come to church in the parish?

You can call this model of chaplaincy the Heineken effect – reaching the parts the normal model of church can't reach.

Another model of chaplaincy emerged in the 1940s. The mainstream of the British Industrial Mission movement began in Sheffield under the guidance of Bishop Leslie Hunter. The thesis here was that the church had drifted away from its true vocation, becoming trapped in a particular social class to the exclusion of others and mistaking

middle class values for eternal Christian truths. To address this, Hunter sent Ted Wickham and others into the steelworks of Sheffield to reconnect with working class culture and to develop a theology which recognised the presence of God in the factories and the inarticulate but genuine spirituality of the workers. This, then, was mission TO the church – the point of putting chaplains into steelworks was to help convert the church and bring it back to its true vocation for all people.

At the same time in South London, another branch of Industrial mission was interpreting mission the other way around. Here, the thesis was that industry and commerce could be, to some extent, redeemed by contact with the churches so that workers and managers could pursue their work as Christian vocation. This was the churches' mission TO industry.

If the latter model of IM is an extension of the Heineken effect – taking the church into places it doesn't usually reach – the Hunter/Wickham model might be called the Orange effect: The Future's Bright, the Future's Orange. In other words, mission and chaplaincy were about bringing the church nearer to what God calls it to be.

The two models of IM were, in almost all cases, fudged in practice. Those whose mission was to transform the church had to present themselves as having a pastoral ministry in order to get beyond the factory gate. And those who were trying to “stain” industry with Christian values often had quite a transforming impact on the church simply by being unlike “normal” parish clergy.

In recent years, the focus of IM has been strongly affected by the question “Who Pays?”. As denominational funding has been withdrawn from this kind of chaplaincy and mission, some firms have stepped in. Manchester Airport was one of the first. Asda now employs chaplains – and not just Christians. This inevitably changes the shape of mission – where, once, chaplains could criticise the church freely whilst taking their stipend from it, that is less easy in the corporate culture.

Now, exploring these differing models of chaplaincy, I think one or two theological points emerge.

- a) The question of the nature of the church – ecclesiology. The dominant trends in Christian Ethics today all focus on the church as the community in which virtue is practiced. The theologian Sam Wells once said to me that he changed his approach to ethics when he realised that, after years telling people that you don't have to go to church to be good, it was small wonder that no one went to church and no one knew how to be good any more. Chaplaincy, I think, has to work hard at its theology of the church so that genuine criticism of the churches' captivity to middle class suburban values does not eclipse the place of the church as an instrument of God's Kingdom.
- b) Nevertheless, it's also important to be realistic about the church as a fallen human institution and to hold on to the possibility that chaplaincy may involve mission to transform the church, or at least an attempt to keep the church honest. The theologian, Nicholas Lash, in a critique of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, comments that, whereas Milbank

places the life of the church “on the other side of the Cross” (i.e. as the realisation of the Kingdom) the classic Christian vocabulary places the church on BOTH sides of the Cross – a foretaste of the Kingdom, yes, but also still in the world and obliged to engage with a certain kind of politics and power.

I think it is very important to work with both theological angles – and to keep them in tension, since both are true. The “both/and”, “present but still to come” nature of classic Christian theology is important – we are not looking at neatly synthesised positions but at ideas in tension. And the church is most true to its vocation when it maintains that tension. Chaplaincy, as a model for ministry and mission which is always outside the mainstream is crucially important as a corrective – not as the whole truth but as a reminder of truths often forgotten.

So, how does this apply to the situation of rural officers, agricultural chaplains and others here? It may be worth starting by asking what it is about the rural context which makes it a fertile place for chaplaincy. What, in other words, are the rationales for rural chaplaincy? Consider these questions:

- a) Is the rationale based on the particular problems faced by the rural parish or congregation? Is chaplaincy about building capacity in a vulnerable sector of the church?
- b) Is it an extension of the principle behind Urban/Industrial mission – challenging the assumption that Industrial = Urban and making “Rural” a key locus of economic activity too? In other words, is the focus on the wider social and economic context which the mainstream church tends to neglect?
- c) Is it about freeing the church from suburban captivity? If so, rural and urban mission ought to be making common cause. Is it about a kind of research project into the implicit religion and spirituality in rural communities (parallel with Sheffield IM model)?
- d) Is it about identifying, sharing and building up the distinctive virtues of rural life – on the grounds that, here, virtuous ways of living have not completely disappeared and may therefore be the seeds of a new civility and common life?

Each of these rationales plays out in the context of different theological emphases. Each depends on a subtly different ecclesiology, somewhere between the two sides of the Cross identified by Lash. Ecclesiology and soteriology are deeply linked – in short, what do we think rural communities need to be saved from (or how can rural communities contribute saving graces to others)?

In many ways, the stand-off between urban and rural ministry and mission is bogus. I have argued (Malcolm Brown, *Faith in Suburbia: Completing the Contextual Trilogy* – 2005) that the ghost at the feast is the suburban church. We had *Faith in the City* and *Faith in the Countryside*, but both reports implicitly made the urban and rural contexts deviant from some unspoken norm. So when urban missionaries look at what oppresses them they see the suburban church, but because urban and rural are presented as the only categories, they think they see the rural context as the problem.

And rural churchpeople, beleaguered by a suburban model of church which presents itself as normal, mis-identify the problem as urban. Until we see and name the suburban model of church and see how it presets itself as the default model which needs no justification, we will not see things as they are.

But I want to argue that “rural” has to some extent taken over from “urban” as the location which poses the most profound questions to the church because it exemplifies deep truths about society.

From c.1960—1990 “urban” was the key to understanding important things about how the world works. Harvey Cox (*The Secular City* – 1965) celebrates the city as a place of choice and anonymity – in the city you can reinvent yourself (which he saw as a kind of forgiveness) and you are no longer constrained to be your grandfather’s grandchild. The city, then, seemed to be about optimism and liberation from stultifying introspective communities. By the time of *Faith in the City* (1985), the city had become a place of alienation, marginalisation and downward spirals. Throughout the period, the city was characterised by plurality – no single culture and no single morality but a melting pot of people demonstrating difference but required to find ways of living together.

The plurality of the city might have been a laboratory for new forms of community and shared life. And to some extent it has been. But since the 1980s the urban regeneration model has tied the city into an essentially marketised way of relating. The prevalence of terms like “human capital” and “spiritual capital” are giveaways – everything that is allowed to have value must be constituted on the paradigm of the marketplace. The city has not, I fear, become the firstfruits of a new, tolerant and pluralistic way of being community.

The big social question we face today is how to restore community, virtue and civility. Once lost, it is almost impossible to conceive how these things can be restored out of nothing. The only hope must be to find the places where virtues and community are not extinct and build them up (and hope they catch on).

One of my philosophical gurus is Alasdair MacIntyre whose seminal book, *After Virtue* (1982) suggested that our hope lay in a “new, no doubt somewhat different, St Benedict”. In other words, we need to discover ways of living together based on practices of virtue in order to get through “the new dark ages which are already upon us”.

When asked to give examples of what he meant, MacIntyre suggested hospitals, schools – places where community life and doing things because they are the right (not just the expedient) thing to do still flourish. He gave an example of fishing fleets off the Newfoundland coast – each boat is a business in competition with the others, but if a boat gets into trouble, no one thinks twice about cutting their nets (at great cost) and going to the aid of the other boat. Communal virtues do not entail communist structures! They do entail the recognition of virtues that bind me to a common good bigger than my own interests.

I am fully aware that not all rural communities are like this. But very few urban ones, and almost no suburban ones, begin to show any of these hopeful symptoms. The

seeds for rebuilding the common good are probably in rural places – even if they are enormously vulnerable.

If the rural church is to be the place where these virtues can flourish and be a lead in the reconstruction of shared life, it will need good parish clergy. The parish is important – partly because the parish system suggests that membership of some communities is not just a lifestyle choice or identification with a social class but a given of geography. And parishes will need resourcing with a broad view of the rural context to help stop parochialism becoming claustrophobic. Someone has to be able to tell the stories that build up and sustain rural communities and help them to articulate the virtues that they practice, often without knowing those things to be rare and precious virtues.

One role of rural chaplains and officers may be to articulate the ethical significance of rural cultures so that the valuable is not devalued because it doesn't fit a predominantly suburban understanding of being church, being good or being human.

This may be part of the bridge between the new ethical emphasis on the significance of the church (see Stanley Hauerwas's work) and the Anglican (but others too) tradition of being committed to the whole community. The church is vital in God's project for the world. But the church is also embedded in communities which exemplify some Christian virtues without putting them openly within the Christian story. The bridge requires the theological fluency to interpret the virtues of rural life in ways which enable them to be celebrated, to resist their erosion and, most of all, to see them as part of a theology of salvation for the world.