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Connecting Resources with Ministry

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TITLE: Growing Organic Ministry in Rural New Zealand

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The language of ecology, organic food production and permaculture provides evocative and helpful ways of seeing the world. I have been greatly influenced by the work of Bill Mollison, the founding figure of the permaculture movement. Mollison's insight was that sustainable productivity is much greater in a diverse ecosystem such as a jungle than it is in systems designed for production such as agriculture. Permaculture is a philosophy of production that seeks to reduce dependence on inputs from outside. Indeed it understands that forms of production based on monoculture and dependence on fertilizer and heavy human activity lead to loss of productivity and loss of future potential from the land. I found these concepts stimulating of questions about how ministry is organized in our churches.

The Changing Shape of Ministry

During the last ten years we have experienced some significant changes in the shape of church ministry, especially in *rural communities*. One of the most noticeable is a reduction in the number of stipended clergy around the countryside. This has been a consequence of a combination of factors, rural depopulation, rural economic hardship, and a lessening appeal of the mainline churches.

Congregations are looking for new ways to carry out the functions of mission and ministry which are less reliant on local resident stipendiary ministry, and are increasingly looking for ways of sustaining and enhancing local community rather than looking to centralized expressions of church and community.

The focus of discussion is shifting from "scarce resources and restructuring," to "congregations finding new structures and new kinds of ministry". Worldviews with respect to the relationship between church and community are shifting, the role and nature of stipended ministry is changing, and the means of sustaining shared identity and belonging (community) are new.

To employ the language of ecology and organic production, local church, especially in rural communities, is looking to be much more like permaculture, sustainable ecologies in their own right, natural expressions of their own community life rather than dependent on additives from outside. To illustrate the trend I have looked at changes over the last ten years in the Anglican Diocese of Dunedin (covering Otago and Southland) and in the last five years in the Presbyterian Church in south and mid Canterbury and the West Coast of the South Island.

In Otago and Southland, just under 25% of the stipended positions for ordained ministry in Anglican parishes have disappeared in the space of ten years. During this time, however, almost no congregations have ceased to worship regularly and almost no amalgamations have happened, either between parishes or between denominations. In the areas of south and mid Canterbury and the West Coast, the Presbyterian Church (and Union Churches on the West Coast) have reduced from the number of stipended parish ministry positions by just over 38%. Again, this is not a matter of fewer congregations worshipping nor amalgamations.

These figures are representative of what is happening around the country in these two churches in areas that are predominantly rural. There are some urban examples too.

The fact is that worshipping communities from these mainline churches are choosing, in some cases well supported by their denominational authorities, to find ways of sustaining their life and mission without dependence stipended ministry. I would like to name some of the emerging features of this new church landscape, under four headings, economic, political, social and ecclesiological.

Economic

As church communities develop forms of mission and ministry not dependent on finding stipend, allowances and housing for ordained ministry some are discovering they have newly released resources and can use their extra spending power in new ways. They now have budgets to budget with and so can ask, perhaps for the first time, questions about their mission and the relationship between their budget and their mission. Congregations are finding new meaning in their giving and their decision-making. Some are showing delight in the possibilities; of changing their financial relationship with the regional and national church, of their ability to plan and support local mission initiatives, of their ability to use money to resource their own members for mission and ministry and of commitment to mission projects by the wider church.

Such economic freedom and the new possibilities it offers have the potential to revitalize motivation in the local church, which too often has been dominated by fundraising for its own survival.

Political

Our denominations have largely organized themselves around units that support at least one stipended and ordained person. The effect of this has been that key communication and opportunities for participation in the wider church have sometimes been determined by structures of clergy deployment. Communication and representation has often been by "parish", where parish means the economic unit that can support a stipended appointment. As congregations find and assert their identity as mission units of the church, and as the technology and methods of communication and participation become potentially more inclusive, different voices will be heard in the debates of the wider church, different issues will become visible, and new energy and gifts will be available.

Of course, this will not happen automatically or in an optimal way without intentional attention to these dynamics at both local level and by the wider church authorities. People in the new structures may not be heard and may not get on the mailing lists – they may be disenfranchised by not having their own stipended ministry.

New forms of participation are being invented and different people are getting access to the information flows. These people raise different and "naive" questions which stand to enrich and challenge the whole church.

Social

Society has been conditioned to recognize particular indicators that the Church is present in the community. In particular church buildings and a resident minister living in a designated house and often wearing distinctive dress have provided a very visible "branding" of the church in the community. As congregations have accepted more and more responsibility for sustaining the church's mission without such visible signs of their life they are having to develop new ways of raising their profile in the community. What is our "shop window" in the community?

Many communities have not had their own resident paid ministry for years, or ever. However, church identity has then been linked to a dependent relationship with the church in a neighbouring town. The new situation is challenging local churches to own their own profile in their locality and to develop a distinctive sense of mission and relationship with their community.

Church buildings continue to be important signs of church life in many communities, but as local people make more choices about how they gather as church, the focus in some places is less on formal buildings. In other places the overheads of maintenance have also led to a move away from church buildings. As the church becomes less defined by and identified with buildings and appointed ministers, it will find new and responsive ways of building its identity and reputation in the community.

Ecclesiological

A key theological question, which is being raised by the trends identified here, is that of where the church proper is to be found. In other words, does the real church exist in its local congregations or does the real church exist in some centralized or collectivized unit? Past practice has effectively defined what is real church according to criteria set centrally and largely related to a unit's ability to support stipendiary ministry and some contribution to the wider church. This has worked to define local church as somehow derivative from a centralized church structure. If a congregation or group of congregations can provide a house of sufficient standard and raise a centrally determined amount of finance to support mission and ministry, then they are allowed to have ordained ministry, and only those who have ministry that meets agreed criteria of training and remuneration are treated as real church.

Identity as “real church” is thus at best defined from outside and linked to provision of a particular style of ministry. This can mean that individual congregations who must share with other congregations to provide ministry are not seen as fully church by themselves. It can also mean that local church can develop a sense of passivity in mission, seeing themselves as receiving and supporting ministry rather than themselves being the ministry.

As local congregations accept the call to be ministering communities they learn a new ecclesiology and challenge the understanding of what the church is, for the whole church. Church becomes where people gather to be church and the centralized structures are seen as structures to support, connect and challenge the local church, rather than provide or define local church.

Denominational Response

Worshipping communities are rediscovering their mutuality in ministry and increasingly questioning the configuration of church that focuses on the ordained. This is part of a widespread movement across denominations and around the world. It can be seen as driven partly by theological concerns, partly by economic concerns and partly by the general trend of democratizing of society and the questioning of professional power, control and authority.

All this has fed the development of local expressions of ministry that are based on members of the congregation being affirmed in a variety of ministries that together enable the local church to function. This development can be illustrated by the current applications being received for departures from the rules of the church to accommodate new forms of local ministry. Some examples involve the need to work out acceptable forms of ministry with partner churches in union parishes. Various support devices have been employed and are becoming increasingly common. These include making Lay Supply or Mission appointments, authorizing elders to officiate at sacraments, and ordaining individuals who have been given prescribed training. None of these approaches, however, are considered adequate.

While many of the congregations in question are small and geographically distant from neighbouring ministry, they typically do wish to remain in good standing with the wider church. Indeed the national church would be negligent to loosen the bonds that hold these local churches in membership with the whole. Considerable thought must be given within denominations to find ways to meet the growing needs for forms of local ministry.

Conclusions

We now have a decade of development of a particular direction in ministry to reflect on and learn from. The directions in ministry that are reviewed here can be seen as a constructive response both to social and economic necessity and to the discovery that a stipendiary clergy based church results in a diminishment of local church *capacity*. To return to the ecological permaculture metaphor, as local church is released from dependence on imported energy and manure and is encouraged to discover its own fertility and diversity so its production of healthy fruits is enhanced in a sustainable way. Once the local church stops seeing the symptom relief of the

outside problem solver (clergy), its own capacity begins to grow.

I am convinced the church as a whole is being enriched by the questions and insights they are raising. It is not just that the church now has an evolving new methodology; a way of being active in the world that is quite distinct from patterns that have prevailed for over a thousand years. We are faced with a fresh ecclesiology, a renewed demand for learning growth to support local people in being the church, and even a new ground of knowledge, which validates learning and theology developed in the local church rather than in the centralized and official church. However, in order that these developments continue to contribute learning to the church, I believe that we need to focus on some important questions they have already raised. These include questions of identity, catholicity, ecumenicity and capacity building. In all of these, the issue is that the churches have become lazy (or have allowed capacity to atrophy).

Identity, in terms of public profile and in terms of articulating the tradition has been left largely to stipendiary clergy. How might the church of the future know itself and present itself without focusing on the clergy?

Catholicity speaks of the way in which the local is also an expression of the whole. The easy and common way of representing that has been by a structure around the person of the stipended ordained minister/priest. How might the church of the future focus its catholicity when ordination speaks as much of local credibility as it does of centralized authority, and when the ordained ministry is both pluralized in each community and set in relationship with other ministries?

Ecumenicity is the way in which particular expressions of catholicity sit alongside one another and work within one household. The churches have spent the last fifty or so years developing ways of relating based on structures of ministry that are now rapidly becoming obsolete and a liability. Much ecumenical 'understanding' has been at this structural level. As we learn to relate to new structures we will need to revisit our explanations and theology.

This paper has proposed that the new approaches to local ministry do build capacity. However, the challenge to the church is now to help build that capacity intentionally through appropriate resourcing of those in forms of local ministry. This resourcing will need to include capability in all aspects of mission and ministry including theological reflection, biblical interpretation, and pastoral relationships.

If the churches welcome the questions and issues being raised by new forms of ministry, then we may indeed be seeing the seeds of a new way of being church that is sustainable and productive.

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