

# EVERY-PERSON MINISTRY



EVERY-PERSON  
MINISTRY

*Reaching out in Christ*



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*To Catharine, with love and thanks*



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# *Preface*



Warm thanks, as always, are due to the congregations of St Mary and St Nicholas, Littlemore, and St Andrew, Sandford-on-Thames, who were the first to try out the material on which this book is based. I am grateful to Vivien Foster, Catharine Morgan, Robert Morgan, Prue Sykes and Claire Wigg, who each read the manuscript in draft and made many helpful comments and suggestions.



## *Introduction: ministry for all believers*

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This is a book about Christian ministry: the ministry which every Christian has in all the places where we live and work. It grew out of the conviction that every Christian *has* a ministry. Everyone can help to make the love of God visible and tangible. Everyone is called to be Christ's hands and feet on earth.

The themes which are explored here began life as a parish course, which ran jointly one summer in two neighbouring parishes, Sandford-on-Thames and Littlemore, on the edge of Oxford. We had just completed our annual journey from Advent to Pentecost, and were thinking that it was a pity there was no Pentecost season – as there is, for instance, in The Episcopal Church in the USA – to give us more time to reflect on this new phase of God's work on earth. We wanted to go on following the story of Jesus' disciples, whose lives had been so dramatically changed by their encounter with Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, we had celebrated the moment when Jesus' disciples became fully fledged apostles. From being people who had learned to see God in Christ, they became people in whom others saw and heard Christ. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they became people through whom the Spirit acted in the world. By putting their lives in God's hands, they evolved from followers of doubtful reliability into prophets, teachers, healers and leaders – people with a mission and a ministry.

Our own encounter with Christ had changed our lives too. We were keen to explore what Pentecost could do with us.

We realized, of course, that there is more to the making of apostles than the miracle at Pentecost. Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe Jesus' disciples as apostles even during Jesus' lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the Acts of the Apostles, some people – notably Paul – are called apostles who did not know Jesus in his lifetime and were not among the disciples at Pentecost.<sup>2</sup> Becoming an apostle is a process of development as well as a moment of transformation, and many people have followed in the disciples' footsteps since that first Pentecost. But everyone who is called an apostle in the New Testament has one thing in common: they have been commissioned – sent out – to minister in Jesus' name.

The word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent', from the Greek *apostello*, 'I send' or 'I send out'. 'Jesus summoned his twelve disciples,' says Matthew (10.1), 'and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.' He sent them (*apesteilen*) all over Israel, to heal the sick, raise the dead, exorcise demons and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. 'See,' says Jesus, 'I am sending you out (*apostello*) like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.'<sup>3</sup>

The group which met that summer at Littlemore decided to explore where God might be sending us. We didn't see ourselves as heroic figures of faith, like the first apostles – not at all. But as followers of Christ we were used to the idea that we were following in the footsteps of the disciples. We had sung the Pentecost hymns: 'Breathe on me, breath of God'; 'Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire'; 'Forth in your name, O Lord, I go'. It was hard not to believe that at Pentecost we were being invited to follow the first disciples into apostleship – into ministry.

Several of us were already healers, teachers and leaders of one kind or another. Di had been a nurse, and Ray was a member of the St John Ambulance Brigade. Julian taught in a school, Judy in a prison. Jean helped in the local primary school, and Mo helped to run tea dances for the elderly. Through institutions from the credit union to the Women's Institute, and through our two churches, the group between them did a great deal in the community.

We all saw our various jobs and activities as in some way expressions of our faith. What we did, we did as Christians, if not because

we were Christians. But we wanted to go further. Might there be other ministries waiting for us?

The simplest and greatest ministry, which Jesus gives to all his followers, is, 'Love God and love your neighbour.'<sup>4</sup> Jesus also several times invites his followers to share their material and spiritual wealth with people who have less. 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' '[G]o, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'<sup>5</sup> St Paul, in one of the group's favourite passages, describes the 'fruit of the Spirit' as 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control'.<sup>6</sup>

In every generation, a small number of exceptional Christians have taken literally Jesus' exhortation to sell everything they owned to follow him. But most of us have aspired to love God and our neighbours while living among them – creating a home, bringing up a family, holding down a job. It was in this kind of ordinary life that the members of the discussion group believed their ministries might lie. Between us, we lived, worked and socialized in many different contexts, with many different people. We should, we felt, be in a good position to practise loving our neighbours and sharing the fruit of the Spirit quite widely.

Gradually, we came to focus on five forms of ministry which we could all practise in and through our different occupations: love, listening, prophecy, reconciliation and teaching. We also identified two things which might help us to minister better: dismantling the unhelpful passions in ourselves which stop us attending to others, and praying in ways which we could carry with us in our daily lives. These seven topics became the seven chapters of this book.

### *Priesthood for all believers*

The absence of a Pentecost season in our church calendar was not the only inspiration for the Pentecost discussion group. It also

grew out of my own experience over several years of being a 'minister in secular employment' or 'worker priest'.

When I first felt called to ordination, I was working as a university lecturer. Without really knowing why, I felt strongly that I should stay in post. In due course, I was ordained and began to work part-time and unpaid in a parish while continuing to teach. Over the next few years, I thought a good deal about what it meant to be a priest working full-time in a secular job.

Priesthood has many dimensions, from the practical business of looking after church buildings to the mystical role of representing Christ at the Eucharist. Priests are called to be prophets, speaking out against injustice and inhumanity in the world around them, and pastors, caring for people in good times and bad. They study and teach Scripture and tradition. They pray for those around them. When they administer the sacraments they act as a medium of divine forgiveness and blessing. Above all, they give themselves heart, mind, soul and strength to God, and try to live in such a way as to express and communicate God's love for the world, and the opportunity which is given to us all to accept and be transformed by that love.

I didn't see myself as a priest in my parish and a lecturer at work, but as living one life of faith in several places. Bit by bit, a few ideas began to germinate about how someone might be a priest in and for their working community.

It would not involve talking about religion very much, unless other people wanted to. Most of my colleagues were not religious, or were religious but not Christian. I respected them personally; I respected their religious and other commitments; I did not plan to give them indigestion by telling them over lunch what I thought they ought to believe. It seemed to me that ministering at work should be more about 'showing' than 'telling'.

Day by day, I would try to be attentive to the people around me, especially if they were in need of practical help, encouragement or just a listening ear. I would speak out and act, if necessary, against inequality, unkindness or injustice. I would try to live in harmony with my colleagues and students, and to foster forgiveness and

reconciliation whenever we fell out. I would look for ways of teaching, writing, taking part in meetings or doing routine administration that made my institution a more loving, peaceful, joyful place, and helped it share those qualities with the wider world. Finally, I would say every day to God, ‘Not my will but yours be done’, and wait and see what God did with my obedience.

No sooner had I worked out this scheme than it became obvious that there was nothing especially priestly about it. *All* Christians are called to love one another, to look after one another, to live in peace, to defend the oppressed, to live their faith every day and to do God’s will. To live and work as I hoped to do, I realized, I hadn’t needed to get ordained at all.

What’s more, my own Church had been telling me so for 500 years.

The ‘priesthood of all believers’ is an idea shared, in one form or another, by all Reformed or Protestant Churches. It affirms that God speaks directly to, and works directly through, all people of faith. It was developed out of a reading of 1 Corinthians 12 by Martin Luther (1483–1546), who spent his early adulthood as a Catholic monk.

Catholic orthodoxy taught the young Luther that he would come to salvation through the institutions and sacraments of the Church – above all, through baptism, absolution and the Eucharist. These sacraments could only be administered by priests, who acted as intermediaries – ‘carriers’ – of God’s grace and love. But however hard he tried, Luther could not feel that the rituals he took part in every day, and the sacraments he received, brought him into the presence of a forgiving God. Then one day, alone in his cell, he had the overwhelming experience that he *was* forgiven. This experience, together with his study of the New Testament, convinced him that salvation is a gift from God directly to each person who has faith. There is no need of any intermediary.

That is not to say that human beings can’t embody and express the love of God, and move others to faith by their own faith and love. On the contrary, Luther says, *everyone* can do that, and should.

In this sense, all believers are priests: we can all help each other to experience God's grace and love.<sup>7</sup>

Luther's ideas were taken further by other reformers, including, in England, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556). Cranmer, too, believed that God offers love and forgiveness directly to all human beings. People respond by putting their faith in God, who 'justifies' us: brings us back into our right relationship of love and trust with Godself. All people of faith can help to bring the love of God to the rest of the world by the way they live and speak. As the Methodist Church would later put it: 'The ideal church does not consist of an active few – the ordained clergy – and the passive many, the laity who are just content to be recipients of benefits from their clergy; all are called to *serve* the Church of Christ.'<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone is comfortable with the phrase 'the priesthood of all believers', and these days it is not much used in most Churches. The point it makes, however, is an important one: we are all ministers, and we can all embody and express the love of God by the way we live, and move other people to faith by the way we speak and act.

### *Apostles and role models*

The members of the Pentecost discussion group found the idea of the priesthood of all believers interesting, but were more inspired by the example of the apostles. The apostles, they felt, were particularly good role models for later Christians.

For a start, they came from very varied backgrounds. Some (like Matthew the tax collector) were probably comfortably off; others (like the fishermen James and John) may have been relatively poor. Most will have spoken Aramaic, but some (like Philip and Andrew, who have Greek names) probably spoke Greek too. Most were born in Israel, but Paul came from Tarsus in modern southern Turkey.

When Jesus called his soon-to-be disciples, there probably wasn't much to distinguish them from any other working men of Galilee.

Most of them are likely to have been no more than ordinarily religious.<sup>9</sup> Following Jesus, however, developed in them a profound trust in God, unquenchable confidence, high hope and unshakable faithfulness. They became an inspiration for many of the people they met.

The apostles are described as having diverse qualities and abilities. Some were known mainly as teachers, others as healers too; some were natural leaders and others followers. Some worked alone and others in a team. They exercised their ministries in different ways. Some (like James the brother of Jesus) seem never to have moved far from home, while others (like Peter and, according to tradition, Thomas) travelled halfway across the known world. Some were supported financially in their ministry by other Christians, while others (like Paul who, according to Acts, made tents) supported themselves. Between them, they show us something of the infinitely many ways in which Christian lives can be given to God.

Most of their ministries lay outside formal religious institutions. In the early years, the apostles are shown trying to proclaim the good news in synagogues and in the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple. They are generally thrown out, because their proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah is unacceptable to most Jewish leaders. It was out of the question for them to attach themselves to pagan temples, so they took their ministry into private houses and public spaces: roads and ships, prisons and theatres, law courts and marketplaces.

If this development was largely accidental, it was also wonderfully appropriate. The life and teaching of Jesus had challenged many of the religious and social boundaries with which his followers had grown up: boundaries between different groups of Jews, Jews and Samaritans, Jews and gentiles, clean and unclean, men and women, powerful and powerless. After Jesus' death, his followers increasingly came to see the gospel as good news for *all* people. Christ was the light of the whole world, and it was right and proper that his message should be heard, his love experienced, everywhere and by everyone.

Jesus taught his disciples to give themselves, heart, soul, mind and strength, to God and to their neighbours – and they did. As a result, people were drawn to them and inspired by them almost as they had been by Jesus himself. In their understanding of mission as something which happened anywhere and everywhere; in their willingness to step over traditional boundaries; in the variety of their gifts and ministries; in their capacity to change and grow in response to Christ's call; above all, in their dedication of every aspect of their lives to the service of God, the Pentecost discussion group felt that the first apostles were an inspiration and an example to us today.

### *Ministry today*

Each of the following chapters explores one way in which Christians today can follow the example of the apostles and minister in all the places where we live and work. They are arranged in what is intended to be a helpful order, but they can be read in any sequence.

Most people find that some aspects of ministry come more easily to them than others. This is only natural: as Paul says, there are varieties of gifts from the same Spirit.<sup>10</sup> Often, however, we find where our main ministry lies by exploring a range of possibilities. And all the forms of ministry discussed here are close to the heart of apostolic life, so all of them are worth consideration.

The foundation of all our activities as Christians is love. God's love for the world reaches out to us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Through our love for God and Christ we are reconciled with God, and Jesus repeatedly teaches us to love God and one another. We therefore begin by exploring the nature of Christian love, who we are called to love, and how.

One of the most important aspects of love is attentiveness to others – who they are, what they say and do, and what they need from us. Thinking about love therefore leads us to the practice of listening. Being attentive to people and to the world around us often brings problems into focus, so from listening we move on

to prophecy. Prophecy challenges individuals and societies to face their problems and address them, which can be traumatic and divisive, so Chapter 4 focuses on peacemaking and reconciliation: how to preserve or restore harmony in disrupted families and communities.

Every life of ministry develops alongside our own spiritual development and is supported by it. If we want to minister effectively, we need to be aware of the problems within ourselves which stop the Spirit acting freely through us, and to practise defusing them. At the same time, it is important to practise attending to God, living consciously in God's presence, constantly as we go about all our other business. Chapters 5 and 6 explore some ways of doing both these things.

Last but not least, we come to the way we express our faith verbally and talk to others about it. This chapter is placed last because, although we want to be ready to talk about our faith, it isn't easy to do and not everyone wants to listen. Actions speak louder than words, and a life of integrity which is devoted heart, soul, mind and strength to God, speaks loudest of all.

Each chapter is designed both to be readable in itself, and to be usable as a basis for discussion. At the end of each chapter there are some questions for discussion, and at the very end there are suggestions for further reading and other resources.

