

Against Participation, For the Kingdom

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Both Protestant and Catholic churches are moving away from leaving everything to the minister; there is a new vision of lay participation in the church. In this article, I challenge those who see nothing but good in this trend. I argue that lay participation often diverts the energy and talents of the people of God away from building his Kingdom on earth and into less important ventures.

I will outline three models of the local church. The first, the participatory model, I suggest contains serious and inherent problems. The second model provides one kind of solution, but is too radical for many clergy to contemplate. The third, which I as a layman have personally found most helpful, has the potential to free the laity to serve God in the world, but currently suffers from being unfashionable. I conclude by returning to model one, to see how and if it can be rescued.

Model 1: The Enabling Priest

I would guess that this model is the most common, especially among younger clergy, among evangelicals and charismatics, and among the more involved lay people. In this model, laity are encouraged to participate in leadership, administration, pastoral and other responsibilities within the local church. The minister sees himself not as a soloist but as the conductor of an orchestra in which the music is actually made by its members. Or to mix my metaphors, members of the congregation take turns at the driving wheel, while the minister is alongside doing the map-reading or acting as driving instructor. In this model, it is recognized that the minister cannot singlehandedly run every department of the church, so his rôle becomes that of providing overall leadership and direction, while enabling members of the congregation to mature through themselves taking responsibility in particular areas of church life.

Ideology

That's the theory. But there are two very real problems with it. The first is that leadership is provided by paid, trained clergy. After a couple of decades of the writings of Ivan Illich¹, we surely are now aware how professional groups that aim to serve their clients, with the best will in the world end up writing the agenda, distrust the competence of their clients to manage their own lives, and are

subconsciously petrified that if they give up too much power they will be declared redundant, their years of training washed away, and they and their families out on the street. For clergy who live in a tied house and with parishioners often more educated than they themselves, the threat of redundancy is greater still. Professions find it remarkably difficult to give up power. In so far as they have lost some powers over the last decade, it is because some clients, fed up with being ripped off or receiving poor service, have decided to dispense with solicitors, hospital obstetricians, and schoolteachers and have gone ahead with conveyancing their own houses, having their babies at home, or educating their own children. Professionals do not voluntarily give up power.

But perhaps clergy are different from other professionals? In a sense, they are the only professional group that is paid to give its secrets away—by encouraging lay people to read and interpret the Bible for themselves under guidance not of a priest but of the Holy Spirit, by training lay people to preach, to run Bible study groups, to visit the sick and needy, and so on. This I suspect serves somewhat to increase the clergy's anxiety as to what is their irreducible function. Perhaps, God help him or her, there is no function for which the minister is indispensable?² One can certainly see the attractions of an Anglo-Catholic view of the priesthood in which some rôles at least are reserved uniquely for the clergy.

But in another sense, clergy are a very normal professional group. Illich, along with various sociologists,³ has demonstrated how the key to professionals maintaining control of the relationship with their clients is to maintain control of the ideology, the normative framework, the rules within which the relationship develops. In our case, this means theology. Theology is overwhelmingly developed by paid clergy; it is overwhelmingly deemed irrelevant or indigestible by most lay people. It provides the gobbledygook by which the laity, ultimately, know their own place.

I write this with considerable sympathy for clergy.⁴ Had I invested three or more years in training, committed my family perhaps irreversibly to a life of some austerity, and become dependent on my employer for the roof over our head, I too would incline toward believing that my church needed me in some special way. Otherwise I could do no other than feel exceeding insecure, however truly I felt called to serve my church.

This sense of indispensability comes not solely from clergy. In equal, or often greater, measure it comes from us laity. Just as doctors do not so much consciously seek power as are given it by their patients, so clergy are usually expected by their congregations to take the lead. Congregations want to be dependent on their priests. Clergy often make desperate efforts to stop congregations becoming dependent, but they carry on being dependent just the same.

The church roof

If the first problem for model 1 has to do with the realities of professionalism and dependency in the minister/congregation relationship, the second problem with this model of 'the enabling priest' has to do with *what* the laity are involved in. Most of our churches have buildings which, even if new, are expensive to maintain and require considerable ingenuity and effort to keep them standing upright, warm and dry. And many of our churches contain organizations such as the youth club, the young wives' group and so on, which are in perpetual need of leaders and assistance. So, when the laity are involved in the local church, they tend to spend their time and energy keeping buildings and organizations going. Such people are not exactly enabled or freed to pursue their calling in the world, to act as salt and light, to be used by God to help bring about his kingdom on this earth.

Even participation in more 'spiritual' activities, such as preaching or house-group leadership, can be counterproductive. A doctor friend of mine, who has a powerful influence as a Christian in his chosen field, remarked to me how his vicar had complained to him in a moment of near burnout, 'Do you know how long it takes me to prepare each sermon?'. My friend replied, 'Multiply that by two or three, and you know how long it takes *me* to prepare a sermon! Is this doctor's time and talent truly well used by involving him in occasional preaching?'

Anglican churches traditionally have used as lay leaders those with time for the job: minor gentry and retired men as churchwardens, young single adults to help with the youth group; a young mum who does not have to go out to work to help with the young wives' group. But I am now observing several tips of what I suspect is a huge and growing new iceberg. Many 'live' churches today stress lay leadership or eldership. Who do they bring into positions of responsibility? In my experience, typically married men in the lower middle class and in the 25–45 age group, precisely the age when they have family responsibilities and have to work hardest at often precarious careers. Fathers of under-5s work longer hours at their paid job than any other group of people in the UK.⁵ After working mothers, they have more home and more work responsibilities than any other group of people, yet it is precisely these people that many churches now seem to be electing to positions of lay leadership. This kind of church involvement is hardly enabling them to pursue their callings as fathers, husbands and workers in the world. No wonder there are so many church widows and church orphans.

The first problem, *ideology*, the remoteness of the clergy and of their preaching from real life issues, means that many congregations are not fed and built up for the fray of the coming six days. The second problem, *the church roof*, the demands made by church

buildings and organizations, means that many within the congregation are exhausted by their church responsibilities and, thus debilitated, are unable to make the creative Christian contribution that is their calling as Christians in the world.

Choice and Subculture

Many lay people will respond 'But I want to be involved in my local church!' Adolescents in particular often feel this acutely, and for many of them this desire must indeed be met if faith is to shift from belonging to parents/authority to something they can truly make their own. Let those who wish to participate be welcomed, trained and enabled. The same goes for those denied respect and dignity in the world: the unemployed, the disabled, the housewife, the black person may find a status from their responsibilities within the congregation that they lack in the world and that truly embodies their status in the eyes of God.

But do not make participation the norm. Do not create a church subculture in which lay participation is expected of all, where those of us who have a calling in the world are made to feel guilty, where we are portrayed as disloyal to the church, to the vicar, to the churchwardens, just because we said no to some churchy request.

Do pray for, encourage, us lay people in our worldly calling. I am glad that in our church over the years we pray faithfully for our link missionary in Africa and receive information about his concerns and problems. I am glad we regularly offer prayers for the bishop, for the vicar and his family, and occasionally for churchwardens, Sunday school teachers, and other lay people helping to run the church. But I am saddened that I have never heard prayers in church for Derek our unemployed single father, for Charles our university professor, for Sarah who sits up at night with the dying. Such a church is not an enabling, encouraging church; it is one dominated by a clerical view of what is the Lord's work, a view in large part perpetuated by lay people themselves.

Model 2: The Abolished Priest

Robert Banks is an Australian author who used to be a paid pastor. Because of the problems I have outlined, he decided after some years to take a radical course of action. Personally, he decided to make his living in other ways. Ecclesiastically, he helped found a small house church in Canberra in which there is no paid minister and no buildings to be maintained. He has written about this priest-less church. The theological ground work he laid out in *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting*⁶; and more recently he has written, *All The Business of Life: Bringing Theology Down to Earth*⁷, a popular apologia for theology to be developed by and for lay people. Banks is part of a movement that stretches right across

the church, from some of the charismatic housechurches, through the Iona community houses in Glasgow, to the base communities of Catholic South America. All these are surely Christian expressions of a worldwide movement that distrusts trained professionals, and would give power and responsibility back to the people.

Without buildings and organizations to maintain, the housechurch members can direct their energies and care to building one another up, rather than building up buildings. Without a paid minister, they are freed to develop a theology out of their own life experience. One or two members of the Canberra group who are senior civil servants share and work through the implications of their faith for the public life of Australia, and along with others published *Private Values and Public Policy: The Ethics of Decisionmaking in Government Administration*⁸. I have yet to come across a book quite like this in the U.K.; and if I do, I suspect I will find it to have been produced by a more abstract, less grounded, group of theologians and professors.

This Canberra housechurch has become dissatisfied with the funeral process as typically laid on by funeral directors. So they are working out their own pastoral theology of the funeral from their own experience, and will soon either be conducting their own funerals, from death right through to disposal, or seek a funeral director that will be prepared to work with their vision.

More commonly in Britain, lay-led housechurches grapple with another problem experienced by their members: the secular education offered their children by state schools. Many such churches are working out their own Christian philosophy of education, and starting their own alternative Christian schools. Personally, I have considerable doubts about many such schools, but it is refreshing to see the emergence of a lay-led theology of education.

Limitations

I am excited by model 2, because it has correctly identified that buildings and a paid professional clergy can become more a hindrance than an asset. The radical abolition of both opens up a whole new range of possibilities.

However, it does seem to me from what I have seen of housechurches in Britain that in practice, and here I make no judgment of any particular model 2 church and certainly not of the Canberra group, they often have a narrow, and still very churchy, idea of the kingdom of God. The kingdom tends to be identified with housechurch. There is a great sense of the local church as an alternative society, running its own schools or funerals, a beacon of redeemed light in a dark, secular and unregenerate world. Concentrating energy on these church ventures surely has the same debilitating effect as model 1 on the energy and practical commitment that members can make to being salt and light in the world. I suspect

that the salty Canberra civil servants are the exception rather than the rule.

Another problem is the classic one of growth. As house cells grow, they require larger premises, and they begin to pay their pastors and leaders. It may not be long before they have re-accumulated all the baggage of buildings and professionals. The alternative is to keep splitting, so that the housechurch remains the basic cell. This, of course, is precisely the model adopted by many independent housechurches, but then a rather authoritarian national leadership may be required to retain any coherence to the movement as a whole.

Model 3: The Servant Priest

A third model provides exactly the opposite solution to model 2, by acknowledging the centrality of priest and building, and acknowledging the inevitability of dependence on the priest. In this model, there is less emphasis on the gathered community of the faithful, and correspondingly more emphasis on priest and parish. We lay people pay the priest to lead the worship, to preach the Word, and to be responsible ultimately for the leaky roof and crumbling stonework. We are fed spiritually in the local church on Sunday. Busy professional people can relax from their responsibilities for once in the week, be built up and encouraged to go back to take the world by storm and transform it for Christ.

The Roman Catholics are surely onto something. They recognize how onerous it is to run a church, so they find someone who is prepared to forego family responsibilities, and then pay him to run the church and the services. This frees the laity to pursue their callings in the world. Paradoxically, though Roman Catholics traditionally have a weaker theology of 'the calling in the world', they may in practice often give more support to their congregations in their worldly callings.

The church building is not abolished as in model 2, nor does it become a perpetual headache for laity as in model 1. For most laity, it becomes a symbol of God in a largely non-churchgoing parish; a place where all know they can come and find sustenance. In a real, but intangible, way, the church and its priest belong to the parish; to be a servant of the parish is to some extent to be owned by it. The laity who actually come to church play their part, but it is not the central churchy part that it is in models 1 and 2.

Though it is not fashionable to say so, I have to say that it was while I belonged to a church of this kind that I was most productive in my calling as a writer. Bruce Reed's important book, *The Dynamics of Religion*⁹, explores how this kind of church operates. By accepting and creatively using the dependence of the congregation on the minister, the church is able to strengthen members to act as Christian citizens in the world. I found Reed's analysis provided great insight

into how my church at the time helped me pursue my calling in the world, and first set me to question the trend toward 'participation'.

Dangers

Model 3, like the other models, is no perfect solution. It does not really get away from the risk inherent in model 1 that the priest, isolated from secular employment, can dominate the agenda with concerns rather removed from the everyday world. His sermons may not connect. Or such a church may function, in classic Marxian mode, simply to prop people up in alienating jobs and derelict marriages, rather than strengthening them to pursue obediently and creatively their callings in the world and so help bring about the Kingdom of God.

But model 3 has the great advantage over the other models that, by paying the priest to do the churchy bit, it thereby frees the laity from a church-focussed life. In my experience, it is the least churchy of the three types of church; it understands that the Kingdom of God is wherever Christians are to be found in the world.

Implications

I believe that models 2 and 3 are solutions that lay people caught up in the intricacies of model 1 church life should seriously consider, especially if they also have major family and work responsibilities. Model 2 inevitably involves leaving a model 1 church. Model 3 might simply mean resigning from several church committees, and taking more seriously your responsibilities at work and at home.

The implications for paid professional clergy appear to be rather more disturbing. Model 2 puts you out of a job. Model 3, unless you happen to be a powerful and well-known preacher, may doom your church to obscurity as far as your colleagues are concerned and to opposition from some lay people active within your church. It may even lead to declining numbers, as lonely people who value an active church social life find themselves nudged back into serving Christ in the world.

Most Anglican churches will in practice remain a combination of models 1 and 3. Given this, my plea is for flexibility. Model 3 vicars, please acknowledge the importance to many young people of being able to make worship their own and give them real opportunities to do this. Acknowledge the value of responsibility and status within the church for those whom the world accords little status. Model 1 vicars, be thrilled with your busy professional man who makes it only to the 8 a.m. communion or the young mum who only gets to family service every second or third week. They may be doing more than anyone else in your church to help build the Kingdom; and unbeknown to you, you may be doing much to help them in their task.

NOTES

- 1 E.g. *Medical Nemesis* (Calder & Boyars, London 1975); *Toward a History of Needs* (Pantheon, New York 1977).
- 2 Robert Towler & Anthony Coxon, *The Fate of the Anglican Clergy* (Macmillan, London 1979), pp.40ff; Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (S.P.C.K., London 1980).
- 3 E.g. Eliot Freidson, *Profession of Medicine* (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York 1970).
- 4 Not to mention humility. As a sociologist throwing stones, I am aware that at this point I too live in a glasshouse!
- 5 L. Rimmer & J. Popay, *Employment Trends and the Family* (Study Commission on the Family, London 1982)
- 6 Paternoster, Exeter 1979.
- 7 Lion, Tring 1987.
- 8 Ed. Robert Banks (Anzea Publishers, Sydney 1983)
- 9 Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1978.