Whom shall I send?
And who will go for us?

Musings on the changing shape of ministry in a Missional Church

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Part 4 of a 4 part series looking at the Church and how we can face the future.

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I have been called upon to be an Interim Moderator quite a few times over the years of ministry. It's a job that takes quite a bit of time and effort over and above the usual demands of ministry. Every time, as I've tried to help a congregation find a new minister, we draw up a list of gifts and talents that we are looking to find in a candidate – strengths in Preaching or pastoring, administering and evangelism. The lists start out long and unreasonable and eventually, they are edited and become more realistic. Of late, I have taken a different 'tack' as I've tried to steer these conversations. I've started to say "Wouldn't you rather have a minister who brings out the best in you? Wouldn't you rather have someone who enables you to do all these things/fulfil all these roles that you are expecting your new minister to do?" It makes a difference.

Our expectations about leadership have gone skew. From both sides (the minister's and the congregation's), we have perpetuated the delusion that the minister must always lead, be in charge, and do or initiate everything. The congregation is involved because it raises the minister above her/his station, gives deference and respect and maintains the luxury of passivity, like an audience watching a show. It is proud of its minister when she does well and disappointed when he fails. It is a shareholder, contributing but wanting results. The minister, eager for praise and adoration, perpetuates this system as well, adding to it a sense of competition with colleagues and hungry for the praise that comes from success but it is a lonely space and the feeling of failure can be devastating. Also, the exhaustion that comes from being the only 'active' party can shipwreck one's calling.

The UPCSA and the ministry

At a recent workshop on ministry and leadership, one workgroup defined the UPCSA's ministry context as follows:

1.   **We are a denomination of rich diversity**
       We are <u>multinational</u> – three countries with separate economies, demographics and socio political realities. As you can imagine, this affects ordained ministry.
       We are <u>multilingual</u> – English is used in the Councils of the Church but people

worship and read the Bible in their own tongue. This makes matters complicated in terms of ministry and leadership.

We are <u>multicultural</u> – people have different cultural needs and practices.

We are <u>multi-contextual</u> – rural, inner city, township and suburban. Ministering and leading in each of these contexts requires different gifts and skills.

Question: To what extent does our diversity unite us? To what extent does it divide us?

2. **We are an Aging Church**

The young are leaving (and have left) our Church. Some go to more charismatic or "prosperity orientated" churches. Some leave and don't attend any other church, embracing a lifestyle that doesn't include Church except perhaps occasional visits in times like Christmas and Easter.

We battle to attract the unchurched (never been to church) and the de-churched (left and have not returned).

3. **The division of labour and significance between clergy and laity**

The Inherited model of ministry and leadership which we have received from for-bears and which we ourselves have perpetuated includes a divide between clergy and laity with clergy being cast as leaders and laity as followers. Certain tasks and roles are reserved for clergy and certain for laity. We wonder to what extent this model was informed by the capture of the church by empire in the fourth century (Edict of Toleration of 311AD and Edict of Milan in 313AD). The restructuring of Church leadership to mirror the Roman civil structure inevitably resulted in the clericalization of church leadership.

So, what results is an active clergy and a passive laity. Other consequences are:

- Laity heavily dependent on clergy (The congregation called "vacant" in the absence of a minister);
- The development of a "professional" clergy similar to medical or legal professionals;
- Burnt out ministers who feel like failures based on attendance or congregational income;
- Juvenile faith and childish spirituality on the part of the laity;
- The congregation and denomination becoming progressively more and more unsustainable as institutions.

4. **The sacred secular divide**

Whether our thinking was heavily influenced by the dualism inherent in Greek philosophy or Platonism (or Neoplatonism), is unclear but the Church ended up with an extremely dualistic understanding of the relationship between the Church and

"the world". Instead of heeding the commission of Jesus to "Go into all the world" (Matthew 28: 19), we ended up staying within the bounds of church property we bought and fortified against intrusion. The world was imagined as unclean and profane and the church as pure and consecrated. We have imagined and built a whole alternative world for ourselves on church property and sought to live here among "God's people". This has resulted in an inability to relate to non-Church people, an awkwardness about Christian witness and a lack of opportunities to exercise our evangelical responsibilities. This, together with the challenges outlined in the previous point, has caused the Church to be ineffectual and passive.

5. **The discovery that people want to do something but don't know how**
Members of our group, including clergy and laity have discovered that ordinary Christians, especially millennials, really want to take ownership of their own faith and Christian walk. They want to discuss their faith, the scriptures and the social and environmental challenges we face. Opportunity needs to be created for this, including reconceiving of the worship event. Perhaps the words of St Paul to the Ephesians (ch 40) need to be re-explored, particularly the thorough reconceptualization of the role of an ordained minister as an "equipper of the saints for their works of service in the world" (Eph 4: 12). This enabling role will surely go a long way toward remobilizing God's people for mission. The ministry belongs to the whole church (Eph 4: 1, 7) not to a few and the gifts and roles are apportioned without reference to ordination (Eph 4: 7, 11).

The changing role of the minister

In a book published in 2014, *Church in the Inventive Age*, Doug Pagitt writes about the changing role of the minister to fit the changing shape of the Church in the last 200 years. He writes about American society but I think there are similarities between his context and ours (Western influenced Africa).

The minister as Pastor

In rural America, before the Industrial revolution, the norm was a small church in every town. These were the days before denominational expansion and whatever the church was, as long as it was Protestant, the Christians in town attended, and regularly. Such a model continues to exist (with modifications of course) today in our rural churches in the UPCSA. In these places, churches are full and well attended but money is scarce and many members are unemployed. Pagitt suggests that the primary role of the minister in this context is that of the **Pastor**.

The parish model put the pastor in the role of the shepherd of sorts. He – and it was always he – was a member of the community, but he held a special status as the community's moral compass. Like any good shepherd, the pastor tended his flock by walking with them, living with them, tending to them in the good and the bad, and gently guiding them in the ways of the Lord. The parishioners were vulnerable sheep who came to church to be fed the gospel by their shepherd. [1]

There doesn't seem to me to be a great deal wrong with that description. The role perpetuates into any context in today's Church although the carrying out of it may be different. It is part of my daily work in a busy suburban church in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg but it is not the only role and not the only expectation.

The minister as Preacher

Pagitt traces the rise of denominationalism to the Industrial Revolution. In the western world, the nineteenth century saw a huge migration of people from the rural areas to the cities. In Southern Africa, mining had a great deal to do with this. People flocked to the mining areas and the cities were born or at least they grew. Immigrants came from far and wide seeking a new life. The name of the economic game was repeatability. If you could make one chair, you could make many. If there was one Presbyterian congregation, and it looked like it was working, we could plant another of the same brand elsewhere. This was the model of Church growth – I call it "making *little big* churches". Denominations grew by replication as the city populations grew. Along with this change came a new role for the minister. Not only was the minister expected to 'tend the flock' but now, they needed to preach the denomination's theology, persuading the people that "Presbyterianism was the answer". The compelling (and entertaining) sermon was a great way to draw people in and keep them coming back.

The minister as Teacher and CEO

Pretty soon, the information Age was upon us but it was not as if the industrial age stopped and the information age began. They kind of coexisted. Some define the arrival of the information age as the time when global news became local – that is usually associated with the affordability of having a television in your own home. People began to move from the cities to the suburbs and townships. They commuted to work either by public or private transport. The schools were built in these new areas and became the centre of family life. Education became an aspiration and many ministers 'went back to school' to earn further qualifications part-time while working. Some qualified in Counselling or some other affiliated field. The general rise in literacy among the members of the congregation

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[1]   Doug Pagitt, *Church in the Inventive Age*, Abingdon Press, Nashville TN, 2014.

made ministers feel like they should know the faith (doctrine, denominational polity etc) so as to justify their pay. The belief that the educational model was the best way to pass on faith led to investment in Sunday School, in Bible Study and in all manner of courses. The minister was expected to be able to 'hold their own' in the classroom as well as the pulpit. Another addition was the notion of the minister as the CEO of the Church. They were relied on as being able to manage and lead. Sometimes additional Staff were hired and the minister was expected to manage them as well. As the activity and profile of the ordained minister increased, so the passivity of church members decreased. Members were content when there was a good, talented minister "in charge".

The minister as enabler

Doug Pagit describes a possibility for creating a new future. It is a future seeking to work with the prevailing culture that God seems to be unfolding among us. People of faith and even those who seek meaningful exploration of faith seem to be eager to take their faith into their own hands or, as Paul puts it, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2: 12). This kind of environment lends itself to ministry as enabling (or "equipping the Saints" See Eph 4: 12) which may be what the role of minister was intended to be all along? There will always be need for pastoring and preaching, even teaching and some managing but the posture will need to be different – enabling, guiding and equipping. The initiative changes hands and the minister becomes a supporter, a mentor, even a 'soul friend'.

I'm beginning to wonder whether we have not come 'full circle'. It seems to me that ministers who insist upon the strong and powerful forms of personal leadership associated with the past might not contribute, even if unknowingly, to the decline of the church. This may very well be a new wind of the Spirit blowing through that would change us into more effective instruments of His grace.

The Inventive age is one in which inclusion, participation, collaboration and beauty are essential values. [i]

Where to from here?

This final article in the series "Becoming a future Church" is about the future of ordained ministry in the UPCSA but it is also, by inferment, about Church leadership in general. It is a plea that we consider again whether the prevailing leadership style is working and if not, ask ourselves "Why?" It is a proposal to consider in regard to selection and training of ministers and I guess, in it there is a suggestion that we might, by default, be influencing the adoption of faith of many who find the church unpalatable but who still seek an

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[1]   Doug Pagitt, *Church in the Inventive Age*, Abingdon Press, Nashville TN, 2014.

encounter with Jesus.

Questions:

- What styles of ministry have you experienced in your association with the Church over the years and which appeals to you?
- How did ministers involve you in the work and witness of the Church? What roles were open and which were reserved?
- List some ways a more collaborative style may stimulate growth.

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