

The Unchanging Heart of Parochial Incumbency

A Report by the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

On 19 October 2020, the Standing Committee made the following request to the Diocesan Doctrine Commission, regarding the nature of parochial incumbency and the cure of souls:

‘Standing Committee requests the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission to produce a report on the nature of parochial incumbency and the cure of souls, with particular attention to its full-time character (or otherwise), to be provided as theological advice to the Stipends and Allowances Committee as assistance towards their policy review of ministry remuneration and preparation for retirement’.

Introduction

1. In the search for resources to clarify the nature of parochial incumbency with particular reference to its full-time character or otherwise, the Scriptures provide us with a number of important principles and foundational perspectives. However, in our engagement with the scriptural material, we need to be alert to the dangers of anachronism and misapplication. Categories such as full-time and part-time employment and parochial incumbency are features of the situation to which we wish to apply the teaching of Scripture. But we must be cautious in discerning direct correspondences between our context and the ancient world of the Scriptures themselves. While the two contain many similarities, they are not identical.

Scripture

2. The idea of support for a group who are dedicated to a ministry task full-time may be seen in principle in the Old Testament, where the priests were provided for by the people’s tithes and offerings (Num 18; 2 Chron 31:4).
3. Jesus and his disciples were provided for in their ministry by the generosity of others and Jesus affirms the principle of supporting those doing the work of the Lord (at least in kind, Luke 10:7). This speaks more to the appropriateness of support than to the full-time nature of ministry as such, though the implication is that the followers of Jesus had left other visible means of support to accompany him (cf. Mark 1:16-20).
4. In Paul’s extended discussion of giving up one’s freedom for the sake of the gospel, he speaks of the right of apostles to be supported in the context of their ministries (1 Cor 9:14). This extends to the support of an accompanying wife (1 Cor 9:5). In 1 Corinthians 9:6, it is explicit that their role can entail full-time devotion to the task of apostleship, so that such support is required. This ‘rightful claim’ (1 Cor 9:12, 15) is one that Paul says he can forego voluntarily. While the context applies this teaching to the apostles, the inclusion of Barnabas among this grouping expands the scope of this designation beyond ‘the twelve’ to those who have seen the risen Lord (1 Cor 9:1) and to others conducting ministry in his name.

5. The Pastoral letters contain the most extended discussion of issues relating directly to church leadership. The first thing to observe in these letters is that the pattern and structures of church leadership are hard to pin down, especially in their relationship with each other. There are certain men who exercise a legitimate role in teaching and/or exercising authority (1 Tim 2:12): the overseer/elder, who is to be of exemplary character and able to teach (1 Tim 3:1-7); the servants or deacons or ministers, who likewise are to be of good character, but who don't seem to be required to teach (1 Tim 3:8-13); the council of elders, who laid hands on Timothy (1 Tim 4:14); the elders who lead, some of whom labour in the word and teaching (1 Tim 5:17-22); and the faithful men to whom the good doctrine of the gospel is passed on, and who in turn teach others (2 Tim 2:2).
6. While the identity of these various groups is not entirely clear, the ability to teach is an important qualification for the overseer/elder (1 Tim 5:17, 2 Tim 2:2; 4:2). They are the only group who are said to be paid for their work (1 Tim 5:17-18). Does that make them similar to what we would call a 'parish minister'? Were any of these different roles necessarily full-time or part-time? These questions cannot be established with any certainty from the letters as we have them.
7. The pastoral leader who features most prominently is Timothy himself. He is Paul's protégé and true child in the faith (1 Tim 1:2, 18), and seems to be a transitional figure in the progress of the apostolic mission. As Paul was for him, so he is to be for the next generation of gospel workers—a guardian and authoritative teacher of the good deposit that is to be handed on, and a living example of its doctrine in action (1 Tim 4:6-16; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:1-7). This is particularly evident in 2 Timothy 2–4. The kind of 'workman' that Timothy is to be (as described in these chapters) mirrors Paul's example, and in turn serves as an example for those to follow.
8. The three images of 2 Timothy 2:3-7 are significant in this connection: the good soldier who is single-minded in his devotion to his Lord and shares in the suffering that military service requires; the rule-abiding athlete who stays in his lane; and the hard-working farmer who works in hope of sharing in the crop. All describe the kind of 'workman' that Timothy is to be, and which is explicated in the chapters that follow—a gospel worker who is not entangled in worldly pursuits, who is devoted body and soul to the service of their Master, who rightly handles the word of truth, who gains a benefit from their labour,¹ and who gladly accepts the inevitable opposition, persecution and suffering that will follow.
9. With respect to the nature of pastoral incumbency today, the Pastoral epistles do not prescribe how many hours a minister should work, how much they should be paid, or whether the role is necessarily full-time or part-time. However, they do portray a pattern of life and work that serves as a model for all pastoral ministry and leadership, as it is passed down from generation to generation.

¹ Philip Towner suggests the implication is some kind of financial remuneration (P.H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994], 174). William Mounce concedes this is a possibility but prefers a reference to an eschatological sharing in the fruit of the ministry (W.D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000], 508). John Stott sees a general reference to holiness and converts (J.R.W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, BST [Leicester: IVP, 1973], 57). Luke Johnson represents a number of scholars who simply read the metaphor as expressing the need to endure suffering of one wants to gain a reward, without specifying the details (L.T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* [New York: Doubleday, 2001], 371-2).

10. It is on the basis of this pattern that pastoral leadership has always been viewed more in vocational terms than as a job. It is a task that ministers devote themselves to, putting aside worldly pursuits and entanglements. A living is provided so that they can give themselves to please their Lord and to pursue the vital task of continuing to guard and live and teach and pass on the apostolic gospel with all the suffering and hardship that this will bring (2 Tim 1:8, 12; 2:3, 9; 3:11; 4:5).
11. Honour and respect should be given to those who serve based on the task they are called to (1Thess 5:12-13). Churches honour their teachers and leaders by sharing with them and providing for them (Gal 6:6; 1 Tim 5:17-18).
12. Finally, Paul notes that there were some whose only motive in ministry was financial gain (1 Tim 6:5, 9; 2 Tim 3:2) and so stresses on multiple occasions that those who are appointed to gospel ministry ought not to be lovers of money (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Tit 1:7). This highlights the important question of character for those in positions of pastoral leadership and the ongoing possibility of materialism as a temptation, and it also raises the question as to how churches can support their ministers in a way that reduces this temptation.

Anglican Formularies

13. The Anglican formularies that bear upon the question of the Cure of Souls (*cura animarum*) are the 39 Articles (especially Articles 23 and 26) and the Ordinal (especially ‘The Form and Manner of Making of Deacons’ and ‘The Form and Manner of Ordering of Priests’).
14. Articles 23 and 26 are clearly meant to counter both the self-selecting itinerant preachers and ministers associated with the radical elements of the Reformation (the Anabaptists) and any suggestion that the unworthiness of ministers nullifies the ministry they have exercised. Neither Article speaks directly on the duties and shape of parochial pastoral ministry, but both make clear that the public preaching of the word and the ministry of the sacraments is involved, and that there is an accountability for both life and ministry on the part of those participating in it.
15. One other significant factor, especially as it finds expression in Article 23, is the congregational focus of this public ministry. Those who exercise such a public ministry are authorised to do so by those who themselves have the authority ‘to call and send ministers into the Lord’s vineyard’. In contemporary practice, the bishop licenses the minister to serve in a particular congregation.
16. The Ordinal differentiates the role of the Deacon from the Curate. In the ‘Form and Manner of Making of Deacons’, the only mention of ‘the Curate’ (the one who exercises the Cure of Souls) occurs when the bishop instructs the ordinand that deacons must report the condition of the needy in the parish ‘unto the Curate’. It is evident that in this service Deacons are not considered to be those who exercise the Cure of Souls. In our contemporary setting, this suggests that the Cure of Souls is the responsibility of the senior minister.²

² This is supported by the entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: ‘Curate. Properly, a clergyman who has the charge (“cure”) of a parish, i.e., in England a rector, vicar, or perpetual curate. Such a clergyman is also known as the “incumbent”. He is chosen by the “patron” (the person having the right to nominate a clergyman

17. In the service for the Ordering of Priests, the third question of the Bishop to the ordinand inquires of his willingness to ‘teach the people committed to your Cure and Charge’. It also speaks of admonishing and exhorting ‘as well to the sick as to the whole, within your Cures’. It is clear that the Cure of Souls is given to the Priest.
18. It is also clear that this is an all-encompassing responsibility. The charge of the Bishop reminds the Priest how he ‘ought to forsake and set aside (as much as you may) all worldly cares and studies’. At its heart, the ministry of the Priest is a ministry of word and sacrament among the congregation of God’s people, which is nourished and directed by the study, teaching, and obeying of Scripture.

The Changing Context of Parochial Incumbency

19. In the New Testament, there was clearly a geographical character to church life and ministry. This explains why Paul instructed Titus to ‘appoint elders in every town’ (Tit 1:5). As the Christian mission spread through Europe, not just in the cities but into the countryside, and as church buildings were erected in those places, the idea of the ‘parish’ as a local geographical area emerged. Over time a structure developed associating parishes with the nearest episcopal seat, the origin of the modern diocese.³
20. The English Reformation retained and developed this parochial system. The parish was a geographical area. All who lived within the boundaries of the parish were considered members of the parish church. The Curate was responsible to ensure that recalcitrant citizens went to church, that unrepentant sinners were chastised and brought to repentance, and every person was brought under the regular ministry of word and sacrament.
21. When the colony of Sydney was established, the English pattern was adopted. As the city grew ministry was developed in a way that maintained the notion of every person under the influence of Anglican ministry. With further expansion and the growth of suburbs, land was purchased to continue this pattern of a church for every area. This commitment continues today.
22. For every parish church a minister (or ministers) is appointed to serve that local area. The promises the priest (rector) makes reflect his role: ‘to teach and forewarn, to feed and provide for the Lord’s family; to seek for Christ’s sheep who are scattered abroad...’ The scope of this charge was always conceived to be a specific parish area.
23. Changes and challenges have come to this geographical model due to the greater mobility of people (who freely travel between suburbs and regions), and also to the growth of ethnic or other communities who seek to meet together around shared language, culture and place of origin. Consequently, many Christians bypass their ‘local’ gathering to find spiritual strengthening in other parishes. This is also the case with social networks in the community at large. They are rarely bound by a local main street, or even neighbouring suburbs. Rather, networks form around language or cultural groups, socio-economic or migrant needs, religious affiliations

for the parish in question), and is admitted to the cure of souls (“instituted” or “licensed”) by the bishop of the diocese’ (*ODCC*, 2nd ed., 365).

³ G. W. O. Addleshaw, *The Beginnings of the Parochial System* (London: St Anthony’s Press, 1953).

and more. The result is a multi-ethnic urban setting with highly complex social networks. This poses a further challenge to the traditional model of the cure of souls. As a consequence, ministers may not be able to reach all the various cultural or linguistic groups in their geographical parish, since a variety of approaches, or culturally or linguistically sensitive ministries, may be needed.

24. The 'Recognised Churches' ordinance of our diocese has evolved into a response to this reality. Its original intention notwithstanding, it has become a mechanism to create new churches within the boundaries of existing parishes. According to the report which gave the rationale for this ministry pattern, 'the responsibilities of the recognised church are the same as the responsibilities of a parish. However, the pastoral responsibilities of a minister of a recognised church would be limited to the members of the church'. The rationale behind this was to allow flexibility in mission, especially if the church was established to reach a particular ethnic or social group. This is a different model from that received and implemented throughout the diocese from its inception and introduces another level of complexity to the question of the scope of the cure of souls. The minister is no longer committed to seeking all of Christ's sheep in a particular area, but some of Christ's sheep from many areas.
25. The parish system has some flexibility to adapt to different church planting methods and ministries that aim to reach various groups. However, when new ministries are planted within the boundaries of another parish, it can often lead to relational tensions. These can not only undermine the new venture but deter others from making similar attempts. Yet perhaps a more significant issue is the rising amount of ministry workers dependent on long term fundraising. Many must function less like a traditional parish minister and more like a church planting missionary. However, the costs of the parish system remain the same, making it difficult for some parishes to operate financially. Furthermore, if we aim to raise leaders from more culturally diverse areas or with lower socio-economic backgrounds, we must recognise that the educational, financial, and linguistic barriers they face to becoming a parish minister are significant.

Conclusion

26. A judgment on 'the nature of parochial incumbency and the cure of souls, particularly its full-time character', is not, at least in the first instance, a theological one. There is little in terms of the way that God relates to the world through his Son and by his Spirit that directly mandates specific 'working conditions' for an individual engaged in what we call vocational ministry. The bulk of New Testament material refers to the character, convictions and competencies of the men concerned. However, as we have seen, this does not mean there are no biblical principles which bear upon the issue. The apostolic injunction to his protégé to devote himself to the task generates such a principle, as does his own willingness to forgo his right to be supported by those he served for their benefit.
27. Whether or not the early church adopted and adapted practices that reflected their first century culture, these practices were guided and governed by gospel imperatives. From this perspective we may infer that they followed the maxim of the council of Jerusalem, 'it seemed good to the Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28). The churches arranged for individuals endowed by the Spirit with gifts of teaching,

evangelism, etc., to devote themselves entirely to ‘making disciples’ locally and/or abroad. With the church’s material support, they pursued this ministry free from the demands of labouring to provide for their families.

28. With the passing of time and in the providence of God these early practices of ministry became institutionalised along with many other aspects of Christian communal life. Our practices in Sydney are derived from the traditional relationship between the Anglican denomination and the British Empire. More recently these have been reshaped in keeping with the demands of ministry and mission in a multicultural and secular society.
29. However, contemporary Anglican ministers (whether of traditional parishes or ‘recognised churches’) continue to commit themselves to the twin responsibilities of the ‘Cure of Souls’: to seek the spiritual welfare of the members of the congregation and to seek in evangelism for Christ’s sheep who are scattered abroad, whether in a particular geographical area or via a particular network of relationships. These are both demanding responsibilities that in one sense can never be fully discharged.
30. The ongoing expectation that those who undertake this difficult task do so ‘full-time’ is connected with the over-riding importance, urgency and complexity of the task in both its aspects. Single-minded devotion to this task requires all that a minister can give, and then more. Other demands should only intrude insofar as they are necessary (e.g., in certain circumstances where ‘tent-making’ is temporarily required) or connected to the broader network of which the church is a part (e.g., contributing something to diocesan and other fellowships). The key concept for vocational ministry remains that handed down from the beginning: devotion to Christ and his people.

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