

'Ministering Communities' in the New Testament

by Dr John Dunnill

How will the rural church survive? Must it disappear only because the institutions declare that they can no longer go on providing full-time or paid ministry?

The problem of adjusting to rural decline of course affects every denomination in its own way. The concept of 'Total Ministry' or 'Ministering Communities' which I shall employ here (an idea with implications for urban church life too) is one particular solution to this problem widely explored among Anglicans, as well as by others in Australia and internationally.¹

My understanding of the movement for 'Total Ministry' or 'Ministering Communities' is that it seeks a way of being the church in which the giftedness of every baptised member is both recognised and affirmed by being given a space in which to become a fruitful ministry for others in Christ. Characteristically, it aims to create local ministry teams as a means of enabling full participation in the congregational life. In these features it shares with other movements for church renewal, often known by similar names. But a key necessity in an Anglican context, where church life has centred on the eucharist and the role of the diocese, is to envisage such a team including congregation members trained specially for local-based ordination as deacon or priest. Hence, although the enablement of the *congregation* is at the heart of this movement, attention tends to focus, controversially, on the delegation of specific *ordained* ministries to the local sphere, and ways of integrating this with a continuing diocesan oversight and a received theology of ordination.

However, this article is not about questions of Anglican orders. It arises from a concern to explore the New Testament roots of the model of church implied in the concept of 'Ministering Communities'.² Is this a genuine expression of the Gospel, or merely a pragmatic solution? Does it represent renewal of the church or a cheap form of 'maintenance'?³ In view of these fears, I shall attempt to discern, in the New Testament, traces of the threefold concept, sketched above—every-member ministry with local and wider leadership—and to ask whether, in the light of New Testament ecclesiology, this can claim to be a valid way of being 'church'.

What strikes us when we look at the early church is a religious community in a state of rapid development, a highly unstable and experimental organism. We may admire the freshness and energy it displays, but would we not be wiser to look to the form it took in the second century, once it had found a settled state, and broken free of the eschatological crisis in which it came to birth?

When we can't pretend that everything early Christians did was right, let alone providing ideals to imitate, how useful is the New Testament as a model for the church in any age?

It is notorious that concepts of ministry and church order tend to be worked out by their practitioners in their own terms, with the Bible brought in, if at all,

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to validate what they already do. Can there be any form of church order, from papal to pentecostal, that people have not tried to shoehorn into the New Testament? Is it in fact possible with integrity to claim to discern any particular pattern of ministry here?

My plan is to look at the character of the first century church, as it appears in the few documents we possess, to ask: what forms of church life and ministry do we observe there? How well do they relate to 'Ministering Communities'? I understand this task to be the practice of *implicit ecclesiology*. In sketching the data of how things were in the early church we are looking into how God dealt with people in this critical and formative time. Despite the caution expressed just now, I take it that there is an intrinsic authority in certain forms of Christian life as they took shape in that nascent era, if held in balance with the critiques expressed by the New Testament writers. The very particularity of this early development may be a good guide—paradoxically—in remaking the church in our own, very particular, very different, time.

Ministry in the earliest Christian communities

Since the sixteenth century's discovery of 'Primitive Christianity' as both an historical fact and a theological cudgel, the traditional idea that the institutional catholic church, with its sacraments and its offices, could be traced back to Jesus' own foundation, has been subjected to persistent and devastating criticism. The debate, begun at the Reformation and revived in the nineteenth century with the more precise tools of scientific historiography, has created a modern consensus on the character of the early church. According to this consensus, what was at first a community guided by the Holy Spirit and alive with spiritual gifts had declined by 150 CE into an institution fossilised in a threefold order controlling the exercise of charismatic power and freedom. While this picture is not uncontested, it is clear that for most writers what is earlier and simpler and more charismatic is held to be more authentically Christian; structures and offices represent a descent into worldliness.⁴

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In the course of this modern debate, it became clear that well-known terms in current use carried different meanings in the New Testament. We cannot picture every *episkopos* or 'overseer' as a mitred bishop, every *diakonos* or 'servant' as an ordained deacon, every *presbuteros* or

'elder' as a massing priest, every act of laying on hands as the conferring of indelible priestly character. Such terms need to be thought of, in the first century context, as descriptions of functions rather than titles for fixed offices.

From such a re-examination we find that the genuine Pauline letters barely mention those figures of so much later interest, *episkopoi* and *diakonoi*, and make no reference at all to elders, *presbuteroi*. In this they contrast sharply with the Pastoral Letters, which bear Paul's name but have these offices at the forefront of their attention, even though the distinctions intended are not wholly clear. On the other hand, the language of spiritual gifts or *charismata*, so strong in the genuine Paulines, especially Romans and I Corinthians, withers away in the later writings. This seems to confirm the consensus view of opposition between spiritual and structural authority. Can we say, with C.K. Barrett, that in the Pauline epistles 'every member of the church was a minister'?—a formulation he regards as almost equivalent to saying that 'the Pauline churches had no ministry in the modern sense'⁵?

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Certainly, if we turn to accounts of worship in the Pauline churches we shall look in vain for anything resembling a rubric instructing a minister in how to lead a service. Instead:

When you come together, each person has a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation: let everything be done for building up (1 Cor 14:26; compare Eph 6:18; Col 3:16)

We receive the impression of a community whose worship life and cohesion were spontaneous, committed, under the direction of the Spirit. Of course, the Pauline churches were far from being ideally harmonious. Again and again the apostle urges them to place others before themselves as the key to successful living in community:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit: let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another (Gal 5:26; compare Eph 4:1f; Col 3:12f).

Paul attributes this way of humility to Christ himself:

Let each of you look, not to your own interests but to those of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.... (Phil 2:4f; compare Rom 15:2f).

Even in worship there is evidently competition to be the best in prophesying and tongue-speaking, and Paul has to urge restraint by imposing some house-rules: speak one at a time, no more than three prophecies per session, no tongues without interpretations (1 Cor 14:27-33). The life of these communities was pretty tempestuous, for good and ill.

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But what Paul never does in these passages is appeal to any kind of umpire or arbiter of such disputes: no 'overseer', or 'elder', no 'pastor' or 'teacher' to whose authority the Christian community should conform. It is as though he recognises no kind of Christian authority except that of Christ and the Spirit, mediated through himself as Apostle, or those whom he has himself appointed as lieutenants, like Timothy and Titus (Phil 2:19-22, 2 Cor 7). Was there no ongoing ministry, but only personal politics disguised as the prompting of the Spirit?

However, it is clear from I Cor 12 that there is more to be said. In vv. 7-10 he lists nine kinds of spiritual gifts, *charismata*, evidently examples of the gifts displayed or claimed by a group of self-consciously charismatic Christians in the Corinthian church. He classifies them all as variations, distributions, of the one great gift of the Holy Spirit, given 'for the common good' (v.7). This theme of unity leads into his metaphor of the church as a body, whose members are interdependent and need each other. Then, in v.28, a second list follows, at the head of which he names, with emphatic enumeration: 'First apostles, second prophets, third teachers'. These sound like church officers, although they are also (v.31) called 'higher gifts', with prophecy in particular preferred well above the gift of tongues.

There is no doubt about what the real issue was in this instance. Paul was affirming the reality of spiritual gifts bestowed on many—perhaps all—but insisting that the true test of their spiritual quality is whether they serve to *enhance the life of the whole community*. For these barely Christianised charismatic enthusiasts, the key criterion is christological: do we see a disordered demonstration of

(rival) spirits or an outpouring of the power of the one Holy Spirit, leading to the building up of the one body of Christ?

In the understanding of church order within which Paul seeks to locate the Corinthians, there is, first, a universal order of authority rooted in the gospel and the word of God, kerygmatic, prophetic, scriptural. In this, teachers and prophets form, with apostles, a mobile and universal order from which the network of Christian communities arises and through which it is related to its source. But he also names, secondly, what sound like rather humdrum occupations, 'helps' and 'administrations', terms not repeated elsewhere, but probably Paul's off-the-cuff names for what will elsewhere and afterwards be called 'servants' and perhaps also 'elders'.

In a parallel passage in Romans 12, Paul restates the 'one body in many members' motif, then gives a list of 'gifts', partly overlapping with that in 1 Cor 12:28. It begins with 'prophecy', 'service' and 'teaching', before adding four new items, 'exhorting', 'giving', 'presiding' and 'exercising compassion'. Here again, there is an implied distinction, on the one hand, between higher gifts such as Paul himself might have claimed, and which are characteristically the setting forth of the saving word—prophet, teacher and perhaps exhorter—and, on the other hand, active gifts exercised at the local level: the givers and the compassionate.⁶

In Ephesians—which I take to be from a source close to St Paul if not by Paul himself—there is a further listing of 'gifts of grace' (4:7 compare 3:7). That same spiritual power which appointed the author 'apostle' and 'servant of the gospel' (1:1, 3:7) has enriched the church at large by 'giving some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds and teachers' (4:11). Again, three word-centred roles head the list (apostle, prophet,

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evangelist), but it is unclear whether the phrase 'shepherds and teachers' denotes two roles or one. Probably the mention of shepherds indicates those who have responsibility for guarding and guiding a local community, encouraging the unity of 'the body' (that theme again!) and 'building it up'. Such a person's task can hardly not include some form of teaching, although it would be subordinate to the kerygmatic authority of the apostle and the evangelist.

The pattern I am trying to identify is a tendency for the

Pauline tradition to emphasise the central or *universal* roles—apostle, prophet, teacher—but alongside them to recognise other, more practical *local* roles as well. This suggests that, although he is not theologically interested in local leadership, and has in some cases a reason to avoid it, he knows that it exists. This is shown in the way he names the 'overseers and servants' (*episkopoi kai diakonoi*) in the address to the Letter to the Philippians. It is also seen in 1 Thess 5:12: We appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord, and admonish you.

Here Paul speaks of those who share his own labour (2:9) on behalf of the young Christian community. Who has he in mind? It is most likely he has in mind some local members who form a visible group, who 'labour' as he had laboured to build up the community, who exercise some kind of 'charge' or oversight (*proistamenous*, compare Rom 12:8), and as part of this responsibility admonish and warn either individuals or the whole community, on issues concerning their life together. The fact that they exercise their leadership 'in the Lord', I take to mean that they are placed 'under Christ' but more specifically under Paul's apostolic authority. They are not to be dismissed as upstarts, but, he says (v.13), 'esteem them very highly in love because of their work'. And then—that theme again—'Be at peace among yourselves'.

So there are indications that there was in fact active local leadership in the Pauline churches—which he tacitly supported, and which he relied on to shepherd the flock in his absence. Why, then, does this not appear more clearly? How much should we make of these indications? Three factors need to be borne in mind.

First, Paul had in some cases compelling *practical* reasons for *not* appealing to local leadership. In Corinth, the factions which divided the church presumably included its leading members, the most likely instigators of dissension and what Paul regards as false teaching on subjects as diverse as marriage, the resurrection and eating food sacrificed to idols. In Galatia, too, if there are local leaders, it is they who have let him down by admitting into the congregation rival teachers with a different gospel. In Rome, for different reasons, Paul has to tread warily in dealing with rival groups of local teachers, each with their disciples, the so-called 'Weak' and 'Strong' parties.

Second, Paul has powerful *theological* reasons for emphasising the central authority of apostles, along with prophets and teachers. They are the commissioned guarantors of the new identity of those who are 'in Christ', a 'new creation' not to be confused by adopting secular patterns which would reinforce old identities ('Jew and Greek', 'slave and free').

So we can see why Paul might not mention these local leaders. However, they did exist, for, third, there is the significance of a *common pattern*. The picture emerging

from these hints in Paul, though very different from his polemical or theological statements, is remarkably consistent with the hints about local leadership emerging in other writings of the mid-first-century. This needs to be illustrated.

In the Letter of James there is mention of 'teachers', as apparently a settled and demanding role, with perhaps a certain status (3:1); there are also 'elders' (*presbuteros*, 5:14) who may be expected, as a body, to pray over a sick person and anoint them 'in the name of the Lord'. In I Peter, Christians are a flock, under Christ the 'shepherd and overseer' (*poimena kai episkopon*, 2:25). All Christians, or some of them, are urged to act as 'stewards' of God's grace, specifically as 'speakers' or as 'servers' (4:10f). Perhaps this represents a simple two-way stratification of the entire church—everybody either exercises authority (such as teaching) or obeys orders—or else it indicates that while all must discharge their gifts (and that is clear), teachers and deacons have special kinds of responsibility. But, in 5:1-4, Peter mentions 'elders' (*presbuteros*), who are plainly not just the older men of the community but in some sense functionaries, and who probably overlap with the speakers and servants of 4:11. These are urged to 'shepherd the flock' and to exercise 'oversight' (*episkope*); to do so willingly and without seeking financial return (the first mention of money!); and to do so without domineering, but in humility, according to the model of Christ the 'chief shepherd'.

Some kind of local leadership existed in the early Christian communities in the first fifty years of the gospel. This was not everywhere the same, and was known by a variety of terms

In Acts also there are several references to local as well as universal leadership. We hear about elders in the Jerusalem church—a group which may at first have paralleled the authority of the Twelve, and later succeeded them (15:6, 21:18), but we learn little about them. We hear of 'prophets and teachers' at Antioch (13:1), from whom Barnabas and Saul are chosen for the ground-breaking mission into the hinterland of Anatolia. This group forms a distinct sub-group in the church, identified with apostolic order and claiming authority over more than local matters. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas, as authorised 'apostles', delegates, concluded their mission by appointing 'elders' in each church they had established, with a delegated task of guardianship. Like the elders of the Christian community at Ephesus (20:17-38), their task was

presumably envisaged as that of 'shepherds' and 'overseers' of the flock committed to them by the Holy Spirit (20:28). Despite Paul's own silence about 'elders' there are no good reasons for thinking that Luke here is incorrect about Paul's practice (under whatever terminology) or reflects a later custom, even though it will have taken clearer shape in Luke's day.

Local leadership

Hence, even without looking to the Pastoral Letters, or the sub-apostolic writings of Ignatius or Clement, where the functions referred to have solidified into offices with clear roles and expectations, it is abundantly clear from a survey of these writings that some kind of local leadership existed in the early Christian communities in the first fifty years of the gospel. This was not everywhere the same, and was known by a variety of terms, but the following pattern can be discerned:

- 1 It is *corporate*. Whether known as elders or overseers or shepherds, or by some other term, the Christian community regularly operates under a group leadership.
- 2 It is intrinsically *local*, and distinct from the universal and kerygmatic authority of the 'apostles and prophets'.
- 3 Its task is essentially *practical* rather than theological: it includes those who give practical help to the needy, those who organise the community's activities, those who admonish, resolve disputes and 'shepherd the flock' in the interests of unity and common purpose.
- 4 It claims increasingly to be *divinely authorised*, a claim which was at first tentative and resisted, but which developed in time, as the need grew for permanent local officers, including a delegated teaching function.

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Is this claim to identify significant and widespread structures of local leadership basing too much on a few scattered fragments? As always with historical reconstruction, so much depends on determining what is unmentioned, or referred to only in passing, not because it did not exist but because it was taken for granted. In an important recent study,⁷ James Burtchaell argues that we should assume, at least for Christian communities growing up among Jews or 'godfearing' Gentiles, that their

community life would naturally take on the pattern of order in the *synagogue*, and that this would be so familiar and obvious as to excite no comment. Burtchaell argues for the legitimacy of projecting from the known features of the synagogue in Jesus' day, and the known recurrence of many of those features in the church of the second century, to the existence of probable residual components of this pattern in the early Christian communities, especially where they arose, as they mostly did, within the Jewish sphere of influence.⁸

Meeting in the homes of their wealthier members, the community would naturally come under their authority and take on the character of an extended household; servants would serve, leaders would lead. Who else would 'preside' at worship but the host?

Government of the synagogue was not uniform in the first century, but had a number of general characteristics. Authority lay with a 'council of elders' (*gerousia*) who functioned collectively as preservers of stability and tradition. The size of this group varied widely (from as few as twelve, to seventy-one in the huge and wealthy Jewish community of Alexandria); they were generally co-opted or elected from among the senior householders. But as synagogue business had grown over time, everyday organisation had come increasingly to be handed to three officers: the 'community chief' (*rosh-ha-knesset*, *archisunagogos*), the 'assistant' (*chazan*, *huperetes*) and the 'scribe' (*sopher*, *grammateus*).⁹

Now, we know of no instance where any of these titles was used to describe functions or offices in the early Christian communities. Significantly, at Qumran, where another dissident religious group was likewise seeking to express its distance from the mainstream Judaism of both temple and synagogue, new names were adopted for its council and officers, while the essential *structure* was reproduced intact. Among Christian believers who were breaking with tradition it was natural to avoid characteristically Jewish names, and the terminology remained fluid for decades. But the practice of collective leadership by what was later called an eldership (*presbuterion*) can be discerned from an early time.

However, its beginnings are by no means clear. There were presumably many personal and political factors determining exactly how such a group became established in any one place, who was able to join it, how power was

distributed within it, and how much influence it wielded. At Corinth, we know of wealthy and influential individuals who could have formed the nucleus of such a group (Rom 16:23, 1 Cor 1:14-16). These were those whom Paul admitted to having baptised personally: Stephanas; Crispus, who had been 'administrator of the synagogue' (*archisunagogos*, Acts 18:8); Gaius, 'who is host to me and to the whole church'; Erastus, the city treasurer. We can observe how power and status in society and in the synagogue were carried over into the church, when men like those were able provide financial support, a place to assemble, and some measure of protection from outside interference.

Meeting in the homes of their wealthier members, the community would naturally come under their authority and take on the character of an *extended household*; servants would serve, leaders would lead. Who else would 'preside' at worship but the host, or one to whom he assigned this task?¹⁰ The tendency to reproduce social patterns in the Christian gathering is severely criticised by Paul on a number of counts in 1 Corinthians. But it was unquestionably natural that such people would be expected to give leadership to the community and so begin to comprise, with their peers, an informal 'eldership' (although, as I have noted, Paul does not use this word). It was from among such (relatively) rich and powerful members that, as the need arose, there emerged individuals with specific administrative responsibilities as head of the community, a role which in time came to be known universally as *episkopos*, overseer. Interestingly, the practical functions of the synagogue assistant (the *chazan*) were reproduced in the church not only by a new name but typically by a new collectivity: the servants (*diakonoi*).

Authority and ministry

I am arguing that there are sound reasons to conclude that the major features of 'Ministering Communities' were to be found in the church at least by the middle of the first century. This appears both from the data revealed by New Testament writers, mainly in passing, and from a probability that synagogal patterns were reproduced in the Christian communities from an early date. The essential components are three: some form of 'every-member ministry', a local leadership and a wider form of leadership. Of these, it is the 'every-member ministry' that

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it is hardest to discern.

There is plenty of evidence that the first Christians formed highly active and engaged communities. We saw at the start examples of participatory worship at Corinth, Colossae and Ephesus. We saw also how active they were in quarrelling. But was any of this *ministry*? Perhaps because they were young communities attempting to interpret the gospel out of their varied previous convictions, they developed a range of ways of Christian living and thinking, some of which moved the apostle to horror (1 Cor 11, Gal 4:9-11, Col 3:5ff). Even where this activity was recognisably inspired by 'spirits', Paul had to urge a communitarian understanding of spiritual gifts as given 'for the common good'. Only the redirection of spiritual power would count as 'every-member ministry', and of this there are surprisingly few examples (Heb 6:10; compare Acts 2:42-47, 1 Thess 1:2-7, Heb 10:32-34).¹¹ Most of the material relating to this theme is in fact admonition. So, it seems to me, that it is not true to say, as C.K. Barrett claimed, that according to Paul's writings, 'every member of the church was a minister'.¹² That they should be was certainly Paul's hope, a hope which he affirms with glowing faith, but the reality is elusive.

It is a mistake to think of local leadership as somehow less authentically Christian than every-member ministry

Much better evidenced is the growth of a layer of *local leadership*. There are good grounds for thinking that this developed early, and was the key factor in the maturing of the churches. It is a mistake to think of local leadership as somehow less authentically Christian than every-member ministry. The tendency to think so, in the twentieth century, has been influenced by Weber's distinction between 'charismatic' and 'institutional' authority.¹³ On this view, the development of local leadership was a stage in the church's very swift decline from reliance on the Spirit, but it can be understood, alternatively, as a bridge between apostolic leadership and congregational life, a bridge which mediated the one to the other and enabled both to become fruitful in ministry.

There was, understandably, some hesitation in the first century to recognise this emergent local leadership. The key resistance seems to have been concerning authority to *teach*. There are commendations of those men and women who 'labour' and 'serve', also of those who 'have charge' and 'shepherd' and 'admonish', but teaching is mentioned less frequently, and either linked to an apostolic authority (Acts 13:1, 1 Tim 6:2, 2 Tim 4:1-5) or spoken of as a high

and demanding calling (Jas 3:1, 2 Tim 4:2). No doubt there were very good reasons why apostles might hesitate to recognise others as sufficiently imbued with the gospel, the scriptures and the Holy Spirit to impart doctrine in conformity with their own witness. But no doubt also the development of the understanding of the faith of the average Christian was actually hampered in the first century, until both the skill and the authority existed for the teaching of the faith at local level, beyond dependency on passing apostles or their delegates.¹⁴

Two texts clarify the working of the threefold pattern. In I Cor 16:15-18, Paul writes:

Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to subordinate yourselves to such people, and to everyone who works and toils with them.

He then reveals that Stephanas and two companions are with him, as congregational representatives, and urges: 'So give recognition to such persons'. Paul is according to these people, who have devoted themselves to the common good, an *authority of service*, giving approval to Stephanas and his household without claiming to have authorised them and their work but recognising the authority they have established by practice. He appears to be implicitly giving Stephanas the role of community head, perhaps in preference to other claimants. But his authority is to serve and oversee the community. Notice that Paul has no such tolerance of those who appoint themselves to apostolic status as rival teachers, like the 'super-apostles' of Corinth (2 Cor 12:11) or the Judaisers of Galatia (Gal 1:6-9).

Ephesians 4:12 is a crucial verse for our understanding of first century ministry. God gave to the church (4:11) certain people as gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers—the last two, as I argued earlier, representing local as opposed to universal leadership). And these were given: to equip the saints; for the work of service; and for building up the body of Christ.

Ministry is a function of mutuality, of the devoting of gifts and concern to each other within the church

What is the connection between these three tasks? Along with most recent writers and translators, I take the view that the first task, *equipping the saints*, indicates the primary purpose of authorised leaders, while *the work of service/ministry* and *the building up of the body* are subsidiary tasks taken on by the community once suitably

equipped.¹⁵

In arguing for a different interpretation, Andrew Lincoln comments: 'it is hard to avoid the suspicion that opting for the other view is too often motivated by a zeal to avoid clericalism and to support a 'democratic' model of the church'.¹⁶ The caution is appropriate, however the Pauline author is espousing a view of the church which is by no means 'democratic', but rather depends on a more relational concept of authority than has generally prevailed. We saw earlier that the theme of the unity of the body, and its corresponding growth—the dominant theme of this passage (4:1-6, 11-16)—is tied in all the Pauline lists to the way gifts are used. *Ministry is a function of mutuality*, of the devoting of gifts and concern to each other within the church. It is necessary that the responsibility for unity and growing into Christ should depend, not on submission to appointed officers, but on the saints as a whole achieving what the author calls 'mature personhood' (4:13).

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On this reading, 4:12 demonstrates a lot about the early church, and about what it may mean at any time to be the church. There are *universal authorities* (apostles, prophets, evangelists, perhaps including teachers); there are *local authorities* (shepherds¹⁷, and perhaps also teachers); but the purpose of both lies in whether they can empower *the church as a whole*, the saints of God, to come into living relation with Christ. This does not at all mean that the local church is independent of higher authorities in some modish, 'democratic' fashion, quite the contrary: that would be to ignore 'the proper working of each part' (v.14), and to run the risk of being 'children tossed about by every wind of doctrine' (v. 16).

Outcomes

It is time to sum up. I offer the following conclusions:

1. That while expecting to find fluid terminology, and functions rather than fixed offices, we can discern the existence of what we may call 'ministering communities' in the New Testament period;
2. That there is a *threefold pattern of ministry* in the New Testament: universal, local and congregational;
3. That the amount of 'every member ministry' has been exaggerated, but when it exists it depends on the direction of energy in *mutuality* and in conformity with

the gospel.

4. That congregational life developed patterns of leadership exhibiting features of existing authority structures, such as the household and the synagogue;
5. That this intermediary layer had four key characteristics: it was *corporate, local, practical* and (in time, and with some doubts about the teaching aspect) recognised as *divinely authorised*;
6. That local leadership, as it grew, was dependent on winning authorisation from both 'above' and 'below';
7. That this contested, dialectical growth of local leadership was crucial for the enrichment and sustainability over time of independent, Christ-centred congregations, and for enabling the mutuality essential for these to become fully ministering communities.

Since what we are dealing with is the roots of the *practice* of Christian community, I shall conclude by focussing on some practical implications of all this. I shall offer two reflections and three questions.

First, although I have spent a long time describing the Church of the first century, it is important that we do not try to *imitate* that New Testament church too closely. The church began in a world where there were some clear and well-known patterns of relationships and authority—the synagogue, the patriarchal household, discipleship, slavery—which are not ours. In a world like ours where there are no longer masters and servants, does it make sense to insist on the subordination of women to men (in the household or in ministry) as an immutable principle?

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One difference between the New Testament and us is that they had no problem about 'eucharistic presidency'. This is because leadership of the worship assembly was, as I argued, no doubt assumed by the natural leaders of the community—the 'host' of the assembly; or a resident or visiting apostle; or otherwise another member of the collective eldership. There were no 'priests' in the first century church. But we cannot reproduce that situation in the twenty-first century, even if we want to. The 'natural' leaders of Christian communities in matters of liturgy, doctrine and spirituality, are those members recognised by church structures according to theologically formed

criteria. These will usually include lay people as well as ordained, but still, for complex reasons, when we set up a 'Ministering Community', we are obliged to identify an individual for this 'priestly' role.

This is not wholly satisfactory. We risk detaching the liturgical presidency of the permanently ordained from its natural basis in the flexible needs of leadership. We also risk distorting the leadership structure and with it the whole character of the community. We have to do this because we operate among patterns that are simply different from those of the first century. I do not say that any of these are immutable either. But we cannot just import a pattern we prefer, even from the New Testament. The early church worked out its life-pattern in relation to existing life structures of its day, and we have to do the same.

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Second, I think it would be a useful principle to draw, that everything that can be done locally should be done locally. This would include liturgical leadership when authorised by whatever we agree are due processes. It would include normal pastoral oversight and care (but not abnormal).

Am I right in thinking that for us, as for the early church, a key issue is about teaching? The apostles were rightly worried about leaving the transmission of the gospel and tradition to local leaders until they were sure of their Christian credentials. In the Diocese of Perth, we put our candidates for local-ordained ministry through a rigorous programme (far in excess of what I am sure they bargain for) because, at the day to day level, the quality-control for what counts as Christian life and thought will depend mostly on them. Sometimes it looks as though we are asking too much, but imposing that requirement, and organising that programme, is an essential part of the 'apostolic' oversight of the diocese.

Finally, my three questions:

1. Is it possible to draw inspiration from the way the early church operated without falling into *congregationalism*? That is, what role if any is retained by the diocese and the wider church?
2. Are we only talking about *maintaining* the local church, or is the local church still primarily—as St Paul certainly thought—a vehicle for mission?
3. Is it realistic to ask if we could operate (as the early church did) with a model of *corporate leadership* in the

local church, and how would it work?

It may be that the patterns seen in the New Testament—which are not, of course, the only valid patterns for church life—can help us to reflect on the way forward in our present and future practice.

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Endnotes:

1 The distinctive Anglican heritage has its distant origin in the writings of Roland Allen (see R. Allen: *Missionary Methods – St Paul's or Ours?*, 6th Edn, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995 (1912). It draws on work in the Episcopal Church dioceses of Alaska and Nevada and the publications of the Alban Institute (see S. Zabriskie: *Total Ministry*, Alban Institute, New York, 1995), as well as on British developments such as the Tiller Report (J.Tiller: *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry*, Church Information Office Publishing, London, 1983). The debate about ministry in the Catholic Church, and the development of 'base communities' has also been influential; for example, E. Schillebeeckx, *Ministry—A Case for Change*, SCM, London, 1981. In Australia, this model is influential in Anglican practice in large parts of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia; a 'Living Stones Partnership' has been formed to foster intercommunication among dioceses and regions pursuing this course.

2 An earlier form of this article was presented to the Living Stones Conference held at The Centre, Randwick, Sydney, in March 2001.

3 Zabriskie, pp. 4, 41-48.

4 For the development of this consensus, see J. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: public services and offices in the earliest Christian communities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 1-179.

5 C.K.Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1985, p. 31.

6 The ranking of servant at number two is unusual, prompting the NRSV to translate it 'minister', with evident religious overtones. For reasons why the 'leader' or 'presider' might be placed among the more lowly, local grouping, see below.

7 For Burtchaell, see note 4.

8 Burtchaell, pp. 180-200.

9 Burtchaell, pp. 201-227.

10 Compare Schillebeeckx, p. 30: 'The general conception is that anyone who is competent to lead the community in one way or another is *ipso facto* also president at the eucharist'; for a contrary view see E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, SCM, London, 1961, pp. 186f: 'It is an understood thing that every member can baptize, or distribute the Lord's Supper'.

11 The record of shared life and enthusiasm in Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37 is often discounted here as merely idealistic. But Luke confirms Paul's experience, that the higher the degree of activation the greater the difficulties of control. Whereas Paul presents these features haphazardly and concurrently, Luke presents them sequentially: first, the new possibilities which faith opens up (2:42-47), then, in chapter 6, the grumbling and discontent.

12 See note 5 above.

13 Burtchaell, pp. 138-140. See also B. Holmberg: *Paul and Power* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 137-204.

14 Compare Didache 15: 1.

15 Compare E. Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1998, pp. 395-399; M.Barth, *Ephesians 4-6*,

Anchor Bible 34A, Doubleday, New York, 1974, pp. 478-481.

16 A. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42, Word Books, Dallas, 1990, p. 253. He argues that they are three separate *roles* of the five offices just described; that is, all five exist to equip the saints, do the work of ministry and build up the body.

17 Lincoln, pp. 250f; contra Best, pp. 390-391.