

Lech...

TRAINING CONCERNS IN DIOCESAN PROGRAMS FOR
MINISTRY AND CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Friends: What follows is not my address, but some comments that may help as background and context for what I say in Chicago. I write as I think and as I speak — full of prejudices (which I try to let you in on), with high subjectivity (distrust me most when I begin to tell you how objective my facts are), and with a mixture of insight and error. I hope in our dialogue you can help me sort out the insight from the error. I trust you to use your own mixture of insight and error to filter mine. Perhaps you and I can glimpse some truth that way — I am convinced that without your interaction, your engagement, I have very little confidence that my own views hold water by themselves. That does not mean that I will not defend them to the death, however!

I. A Preamble

I can speak of training concerns about ministry only from a personal point of view. I am a priest of the Episcopal Church operating in a non-stipendiary role that was not envisaged by those who thought they were training me for ministry. As I think back to the training that meant the most to me, I think of youth group counsellors in a small parish in South Carolina. I think of two parents, only one of whom frequented Church during my formative years. I think of a Sunday school teacher just back from the war. I think of friends who struggled through adolescent identity crises (in those days we didn't know what they were — we just knew they were confusing and painful) with me, friends every bit as confused as I was, but who still gave me elements I later came to identify as ministry. I think of an English teacher in college, a Lutheran and a Methodist pastor, a black woman who was a servant, an inept teacher of theology who knew how to teach life. I think of Miss Carrie Cain who taught me what Christian education is all about and Gene Power who taught me what vestries are for. Or another systems analyst senior warden who opened my eyes to a new way of looking at parish life and a Catholic layman who showed me how to put that new way into practice. Obviously, just as you could I could go on a long time telling how I was trained for the special ministry that I now own (or am owned by, I am not sure which is correct)

What did diocesan training programs have to do with that? I really do not know. Not a lot. So I want to begin with a caveat of humility. Let's not kid ourselves that our training programs are the key element in producing ministry. God has his own way of raising up the ministries needed and He is doing that now. In us here, and (God forbid what this really means to our importance!) back home where we are supposed to be in charge of the training.

In my remarks I want to say some things about our work of training in dioceses for ministry, but please remember where I come from. The work of ministry development is in God's hands. We must work at it as if it were in our hands (I think this is the real meaning of stewardship), but gratefully recognize the power and grace of God — sometimes operating in and through what we are planning and doing, often operating to upset or even contradict what we are trying to do when we have misunderstood or pig-headedly gone against His will.

I begin with three systemic problems that undergird our problems of training. These three form part of the environment in which our training takes place and affect everything we do. They lie in our world of religious institutions like great deposits of iron ore, making our compasses often go off course without our being aware of it. I do not know how to compensate for these systemic issues — but I simply note them here. If your well-planned program does not do what you intended for it to do, it may be because one or all of these issues pulled your compass off course.

SYSTEMIC ISSUE I: The loss of Baptism

Something has gone seriously wrong with our understanding of the role of the rites of initiation, particularly baptism. I may not be saying that well — I am not talking about any serious theological misinterpretations, I am not pointing the finger at anybody who is leading us astray with a flawed doctrine. I am simply observing that baptism does not effectually operate for us as what the Church has apparently intended it to be all these generations — an entry into ministry. In spite of the liturgical revolution of our generation that has brought the service of baptism dramatically back to the heart of parish worship and life, it remains something more "cute" than "power-filled," something more for christening dresses than for sacrificial lives, something more for champagne brunches than for taking up crosses in everyday vocations.

As I read my theology and history, baptism is intended to be entry into ministry (in the case of children, it is entry into a life of training — surrounded by godparents and parents and uncles and aunts and Sunday School teachers and acolyte trainers and scout leaders and pastors — for a life of ministry, training that involves being in ministry from the earliest times — as a school child a disciple, as a young person an apostle, yet a disciple in training and an apostle in training). Indeed, one might say that baptized life was ministry and training for all ages. There is no end of training, no "right amount" of training after which one begins ministry. No — it all goes together, messily, unsystematically.

The problem is that we all understand that. I haven't told

you anything new when I have said it. But it doesn't work. Nobody (excuse the excess of my language) acts as if they believed that.

You see, in spite of what appearances are, I really believe that ministry begins with baptism (I tell people I've been in the ministry for over half a century — they look startled — and then I say nearly half the time as lay person and half as ordained — then they laugh! They get the point. The laughter makes the point.) By definition, people who are baptized are people in ministry. That's what ministry is. Are they doing a lousy job of it? Then who's at fault? Them? Or that crowd of uncles and aunts, godparents, et al?

I have some hope. I honestly think that the new prayer book opens up some possibilities for renewal of baptismal vows, for dealing seriously with the ministries that we carry. Similarly, I think our Catholic brethren are struggling with their own initiation rites in ways that may end up being helpful to us. But in spite of the resources the prayer book gives us, I have not yet seen much imagination being used in the administration of those resources. Ted Eastman hints at some of the possibilities. But by and large, in terms of really using baptism as entry into ministry, we are just about where Associated Parishes left us a third of a century ago. We have put the service back in the big Church and out of the Sunday afternoon family-only mode. But we haven't begun going further.

We worry about training for ministry in terms of what kinds of training we need for lay ministers as opposed to ordained ministers, we worry about why so many of our training programs for laity "graduate" people into seminary. Friends — the first systemic issue I point to is this one. The problem is not ordination and seminaries — it is baptism and parishes.

Dioceses that want to help train for ministry could do worse than focussing on how to help parishes understand baptism better and order their lives better to deal with the baptized ministers they are already full of.

SYSTEMIC ISSUE II: Morphological Fundamentalism

(Point of personal privilege — I've been dying to use this phrase again. It fills the mouth so. It makes one feel so wise! Younger generations will not know that it comes from the World Council of Churches great study of parish life "the study of the missionary structure of the congregation" and referred to the way religious institutions get narrow, unquestioning, and rigid about the organizational forms they use in congregations, etc. Here, I use it slightly differently to denote our rigidity about the definitions, roles, and structures of our various ministries.)

In my experience, Anglicans tend to be allergic to rigidity in doctrine, in religious practice, and in almost every

area. There is, however, one area in which that does not hold: when we talk about ministry. We get a bit tight-lipped with our ecumenical colleagues whenever the negotiations get around to that part of the Lambeth Quadrilateral. Not in conversations about lay ministry, but in conversations about ordained roles. (Let me admit to a bit of discomfort with the way we Anglicans talk about one order of ministry — bishops. We get awfully self-righteous and proud when we talk about this great gift we understand that we hold in trust for less fortunate Christian bodies. Well, I like bishops pretty good, too — and insist that some of my best friends are bishops —but I don't like the self-righteousness and pride that I hear in our conversations. Perhaps I am too much aware that we only have them at all because of what was almost an accident of history and politics; and then that the Communion that claims bishops to be so essential somehow just didn't get around to arranging for the church in this country to have them at all for the first half of its existence.)

"Once a priest, always a priest," we say. We say it so clearly and so consistently in our actions (let's face it, we don't talk that way much, we just act on the basis of that assertion) that a lot of other things logically follow. We come to interpret Bill Gordon's imaginative response to special needs in Alaska and think "once a sacramentarian, always a sacramentarian;" once a parish administrator, always a parish administrator; once a pastoral visitor, always a pastoral visitor.

It is this fixation on permanence that locks us into straitjackets of conformity in more roles than that of the priest, where the saying was coined. The problem is that if one is committed to permanence in the outcome of one's actions, one has to be very, very careful not to make a mistake. Look what it leads us to do in relationship to priesthood. Have you ever seen the succession of hoops we set up for people to jump through so we can be sure not to make a mistake? We psychologize the candidates; we put them through internships (pre-seminary, post-seminary, and sometimes during seminary); we GOE them; we interview them and interview them and interview them; we we do everything we can think of to make sure we weed out the "misfit." Sometimes it seems that we are ready to wash out a thousand potentially able candidates to be sure one misfit doesn't sneak by while we aren't looking. (You probably hear as much as I do about the two results of this — 1) a lot of capable people will not put themselves through what begins to feel like a lot of tiresome Mickey Mouse; and 2) misfits seem to come equipped with an ability to jump through the hoops just about as well as anybody else!)

In times of rapid change it is terribly important to be able to try out some things that may not work. It is called giving things a provisional try. I think that in the area of ministry we need a lot more flexibility than we show in our morphological fundamentalism about ministry. You are likely to have to test some things that aren't going to turn out quite as

you expected. If you've got to perfect them before you start, or if you are clutched up about making a mistake, you are not likely to come up with anything the rest of us can use.

Let me give one example from our history. Canon Frank Synge of Christchurch, New Zealand, made an interesting proposal at the 1963 Anglican Congress (is there anybody out there surprised that it has now been 22 years since the one and only congress of laity, clergy, and bishops in a worldwide communion that insists it believes that to be of the essence of the Church? I guess we have to accept the fact that it is too expensive to act on our beliefs and go on letting bishops make our decisions for us. Perhaps they do know better. My readers will have to permit me my strange biases — I am still trying to unpack a statement made at one of the Anglican Consultative Council meetings when the lack of women delegates was discussed — "The system tries to be fully representative — one third bishops, one third clergy, and one third laity." When somebody understands that, I hope they will explain it to me. End of discursus).

Canon Synge looked at the early history of the Church and made a modest suggestion. He pointed out that the Eucharist was always the bishop's eucharist, but that at the fourth century, with the spread of Church membership, bishops were forced to sub-let the service, if you will, to the presbyter, the priest. Since that time ordination carries the authority to the priest to continue to assist the bishop by celebrating the eucharist for him. The modest suggestion by Canon Synge was that bishops might cover the same problem today by licensing godly lay persons for specific occasions to do what he might ordain a priest to do on a regular and permanent basis. I don't think anybody ever tried it out, we are so hung up on the permanence of the order and the possibility that we might make a mistake. (there is another objection, which comes in the point I have to make below).

At any rate, our inflexibility about roles of ministry locks us into being unable to do anything until we get it so safe it probably won't make any difference.

Another cost of this morphological fundamentalism about ministry, a cost I feel very deeply — is the cost of the people who have pioneered new ways that went out of vogue. How many brave experiments to you know of — worker priests, non-stipendiary ministries, diaconal ministries, sacramental ministries, Canon X Y Z priests, local priests — you name it, we have tried them all. Some are working admirably in some places. But I am talking about those that began well and enthusiastically (you know as well as I how the Church can get excited about a new idea and make it into a fad overnight), but something happens — a new priest comes who isn't on board, a new bishop comes who is not impressed with the movement, or the gas just runs out on the fad. The people who were the most imaginative and willing to risk are left out on a limb for the rest of their lives, a kind of embarrassment to the rest of the church. A reminder of a dream that did not come to be.

That's a heavy price. I think we need to take this kind of fundamentalism very seriously. We badly need innovators (of course I mean responsible innovators, not crazies who think "lets-try-this-just-because-nobody's-tried-it-before) who can help us find new paths in ministry. The new things you want to try will be blocked by our morphological fundamentalism.

SYSTEMIC ISSUE IV: The Hegemony of the Presbyterate

(Another marvelous phrase, this one courtesy of Aidan Kavanaugh, the Catholic liturgical scholar and incidentally a classmate of two nominees for presiding bishop — at Sewanee.)

These two-bit words simply mean that all power tends to flow toward the priesthood. Conversations about ministry always end up talking about the presbyter, the presbyterate. How many conversations have you had about the training of lay ministers, only to discover that you were suddenly discussing how to train laity to assist clergy in running the Church? How many conversations about training laity ends up describing a watered-down seminary curriculum. (Recently in England I had occasion to listen to people talk about this and to read a number of training documents, and kept running across what seemed to be a code phrase — "Laity" this phrase went, "must learn rigorous theological reflection." I wondered if that were so. I thought about my doctor, a good Lutheran. My vet, a good Episcopalian. My banker, I don't know what he is. My congressional spokesperson — sorry, since I come from the last American colony, the District of Columbia, I do not have a representative the way all of you do in case I want to complain about the stamp tax or anything like that — a good Baptist. I don't think I have much of a stake in their being able to reflect rigorously on theological issues. Especially since I've never been sure I could do it either — it always seems to be said or written by somebody who is sure they are good at it and understand it).

Kavanaugh makes the point that the other orders — laity, deacons, even bishops — really get short shrift. The central reality in ministry is the order of the presbyterate. The power of the laity, of the diaconate, and of the episcopate simply do not rule the life of the institution the way the power of the presbyterate does.

I have an inelegant way of putting it (I seem to be pretty good at putting things inelegantly — you may have noticed that already). The real thing people seem to go to Church for are under the control and power of the priest. The preaching and the sacraments. It is as if they belonged to her or him. As I say it — the priest seems to own the franchise. If you go to a Wendy's or a Burger King or a MacDonald's, you don't give a rip about what's going on in corporate headquarters — you just want your big mac. As far as you are concerned, there might as well not be a headquarters. As far as you are concerned, if you get

your big mac somebody else can do the worrying. You wouldn't be interested in coming down to the store when the grand international corporate president shows up — unless they give away free balloons and free big macs.

From a strictly functional point of view, the priest has all the power necessary to make the thing go. He or she has the franchise for all practical purposes. In the old days, the bishop had the power to give you your membership card (confirmation) that let you in to get big macs; but now he doesn't even have that power.

This focussing of all the institutional power in the hands of one group — dare we call it "class"— skews everything else in ministry. The diaconate will never get a fair test without coming to terms with its power vis a vis the priesthood (isn't it interesting how so many of the arguments about the diaconate have to do with the deacon's vote in convention?). The episcopate's true authority is sadly eroded by the focus of power in the priestly class.

Within the bounds of the Church as an institution, power tends to resemble power in a feudal society anyway. The control is in the hands of a clerical class who tend to make the rules, speak their own language and define what language will be spoken. That class habitually has called the shots for the system, occasionally selecting promising people from the servant class to be trained in the lore and language of the ruling class, bringing them in through the rite of ordination. This power relationship is what is called clericalism. Nobody I know — clergy or laity — believes in it or wants it — but we do not know how to get out of it.

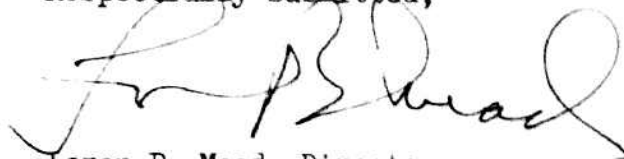
What I am saying in this third systemic issue is that we do live in an institution characterized by clericalism, and particularly a form of clericalism that focusses on the priest. That reality will affect everything you do in ministry and in training for ministry. It will affect what you think and what you plan; it will affect what people perceive you to be proposing; it will matter whether you speak as a lay person or a priest or a bishop and you will not realize that it matters; it will make you take positions that others will not understand.

CONCLUSION: I have many things to say about diocesan training for ministry, and I will make those points orally, responding to what is said at the conference and modifying my contributions by what I learn as I am with you. These comments I give you to think about ahead of time as issues and personal reactions that may help you see some of the complex background for our dilemmas about ministry, and also so you will have some sense of where I am coming from.

My final comment is very simple. I do not understand

ministry. It remains a mystery of grace for me. It is not a choice for you or for me -- that's common ground for us who meet in Chicago. We have a vocation as followers of Christ. Each, in our stumbling ways and also in our rich gifts, lives out ministry in an unique way. Not in our own power, but in His. That is what is exciting about ministry. That is why we in our foolishness can have confidence in ministry.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Loren B. Mead". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and address.

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