

Towards a Theology of Resource Ministry

December, 2008 Chris Walker

Resource Ministry, while having its own emphases, should not be considered separately from the theology of ministry in general. Ministry is necessarily linked to the church, the community of those who follow Jesus Christ. This community of Jesus' followers is part of God's reconciling work in the world. Therefore in considering a theology for Resource Ministry, it needs to be done from a missiological perspective which sees the church as part of the ongoing ministry and mission of Christ.

Resource Ministry necessarily has a mission perspective

David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* points out that the Christian faith is intrinsically missionary. It sees all generations as objects of God's saving will. It regards the reign of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ as intended for all humanity. He says,

“This dimension of the Christian faith is not an optional extra: Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very *raison d'être*” (p.9).

Later he affirms,

“Just as the church ceases to be church if it is not missionary, theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character” (p.494).

So in developing a theology of Resource Ministry we necessarily begin with mission. We reflect on God's mission in the world and see how Resource Ministry connects with this.

In the past mission was understood mainly to be about seeking the conversion of people or overseas missionary activity. Missions were about evangelistic activities or seeking to win 'heathen' people in distant places to Christ. We should not despise these understandings. The Methodist movement was part of the evangelical revival of the 18th century which did bring about significant renewal to people and society. The newer churches of Asia and the Pacific emerged as a result of the sacrificial efforts of 19th and 20th century missionaries, many from the denominations that came into the Uniting Church. Evangelism is an important part of mission, as Bosch affirms (pp.409-420). Mission, though, encompasses more than evangelism. Mission is God's activity in the world and we are invited to participate in it.

The nature of that mission according to the *Basis of Union* is nothing less than the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation (par.3). It concerns God's reign of compassion, justice, and peace which relates to transforming people's hearts and minds and transforming the world to become as God intends. Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom (Mark 1:14-15) and demonstrated what it was like through his words and actions. He gave particular attention to the last, the least and the lost. Depending on the situation of people, Jesus brought healing and peace or challenged the people with whom he spoke (eg. Mark 2:1-12, Luke 7:36-50). God's mission brings both order and chaos depending on God's purposes. Sometimes God seeks to bring order out of disorder for the sake of people's well being. At other times God disturbs established patterns and seemingly brings chaos to open up new possibilities for the world. It is God's Spirit who is the primary agent of mission. The Spirit is like the wind and blows where it will, and is not under human control (John 3:8).

God's people are called to participate intentionally in God's mission in the world. In doing so it is important to recognise that God's ways often contrast with the ways of the world (Isaiah 55:8). Sometimes the church is behind God's movement in the world and has to catch up. People outside the community of faith can participate in God's mission. Cyrus the Persian was used by God to accomplish God's purposes (Isaiah 45:1). All people can both enhance and inhibit God's mission through their lives. Intentionally or unintentionally they can contribute to what God wants to achieve, or they can thwart God's purposes by their sinful self will. Nevertheless, we all are part of God's mission for it has to do with all people and the whole creation.

Leaders, Resource Ministers in particular, assist people to recognize and be involved in God's purposes. In doing so they need to look to Jesus Christ's teaching and actions and seek the guidance of the Spirit to help them to discern where God is at work and how to connect with God's mission.

Resource Ministry in relation to the Church

Bosch says,

“In the emerging ecclesiology, the church is seen as essentially missionary” (p.372). He points out that Lesslie Newbigin has made a helpful distinction between the church's missionary *dimension* and its missionary *intention*. “The missionary dimension of a local church's life manifests itself, among other ways, when it is truly a worshipping community; it is able to welcome outsiders and make them feel at home; it is a church in which the pastor does not have the monopoly and the members are not merely objects of pastoral care; it members are equipped for their calling in society; it is structurally pliable and innovative; and it does not defend the privileges of a select group. However, the church's missionary dimension evokes intentional, that is direct involvement in society; it actually moves beyond the walls of the church and engages in missionary ‘points of concentration’ such as evangelism and work for justice and peace” (p.373).

Resource Ministry is not just a stopgap ministry but is part of this emerging ecclesiology.

The church is “the people of God” called to be a light “in” the nations. It is “the body of Christ” which implies enabling all to contribute according to their gifts and talents (BU par.13). The church is “a community of the Spirit” which means discerning and following the leading of God's Spirit. Douglas John Hall calls it the “disciple community” to emphasise that the church is about discipleship not just membership, serving not just being served. The church is called into being by God. It came about because of God's calling and grace experienced through Jesus Christ. The church is people touched by God's Spirit who respond by becoming Christ's disciples. It is made up of people whose lives are being transformed. It acts in the community and seeks to incarnate God's transforming purposes. It gathers to worship and be built up in faith and scatters to be God's people in the world.

The church exists for the sake of the kingdom of God proclaimed and embodied by Jesus. The church is to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God. It is to proclaim and serve the kingdom. How that looks will vary depending on the situation

and will require discernment by the local community of faith and especially its leaders.

The major tasks of the congregation are: to worship, witness and serve as a fellowship of the Spirit. Word and sacraments, building one another up in love, sharing in the wider responsibilities of the church and serving the world are integral to what it means to be the church (BU par.15). The church is called to co-operate with God in mission in the world. It is to be an instrument of reconciliation and sanctification not just of people but of creation.

The church functions best as it knows, enjoys and serves God, when it maintains its focus on Jesus Christ and God's purposes, when it recognises the Spirit's leading and responds positively. It is at its best when it is "there for others", when it honours life, others and God, when it practices hospitality.

The relational nature of the church is reflected most effectively in a team approach to ministry. Resource Ministry enables the local community of faith to function this way so that they are collectively Christ's ambassadors.

Resource Ministry and Ministry in the 21st Century

Kennon Callahan in *Effective Church Leadership* states,

"The day of the professional minister is over. The day of the missionary pastor has come....The day of the church culture is over. The day of the mission field has come....The day of the local church is over. The day of the mission outpost has come" (pp.3, 13, 22).

By these surprising statements he is not suggesting the end of the church and ministry as we know it. What he is emphasising is that times have changed so that effective ministry will need a different approach, namely a missional one rather than a church culture one. Ministry in this new era necessarily focuses on relationships, accepts living at the edge of resources, seeks to fulfil people's foundational life searches, values external and missional oriented leadership, as God's missionaries. Leadership needs to help this to take place.

The widely appreciated ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* begins the Ministry part with a section on "The calling of the whole people of God." It points out the church lives through the liberating and renewing power of the Holy Spirit and is called to proclaim and prefigure the kingdom of God. Then it says:

The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world. They may be gifts of communicating the Gospel in word and deed, gifts of healing, gifts of praying, gifts of teaching and learning, gifts of serving, gifts of guiding and following, gifts of inspiration and vision. All members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the Church and for the service of the world to which the Church is sent (p.20).

In saying the community will help people to discover their gifts, it is evident this is an important role for ministers and other leaders. Resource Ministry expresses this emphasis.

Ministry is essentially about the continuing ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. The risen Jesus promised the Spirit to empower the disciples to do so (John 20:21-22, Acts 1:8). Jesus' earthly ministry involved proclaiming, healing, exorcism, teaching, prophetic critique and symbolic action. The church is to be about preaching and teaching, healing and liberating, caring for people in particular the least and lost, challenging the powers in the world and at times performing symbolic actions. It is ministry of the whole people of God for the church is the body of Christ, his contemporary mouth, hands and feet (I Corinthians 12: 12-27). Jesus' ministry had a challenging, disturbing aspect, namely a prophetic dimension. The contemporary church needs to have this also.

Ministry in the way Jesus did ministry involved an apprenticeship style in which the disciples shared experiences with Jesus and were instructed by him to serve in the same manner he did (Mark 6:7-13, Luke 10:1-20). People are called into partnership with Jesus and others. Ministry involves both being Christ for others and meeting Christ in others (Matthew 25: 31-46). Resource Ministry in particular sees the importance of following Jesus in this way of fostering discipleship and developing people's leadership capacities.

On the one hand our context now is similar to the first century in terms of being multicultural and part of a spiritual marketplace. Our post-Christendom world is closer to the pre-Christendom world of Paul than in the Christendom era. Nevertheless, our context is also very different to the 1st century in terms of our global connectedness, technologies, travel, and communications. Therefore we have to respond appropriately to our situation.

Ministry is declaring the relationship God makes possible. It involves showing God's love and letting people know God loves them as a reflection of Jesus' compassion. We are to use our gifts and skills in the service of God. There are different types of ministries. There is a life giving, catalyst nature to ministry. The Spirit who empowers and enables ministry is the Spirit of life.

All are called but not all respond. The primary call is to discipleship. All who name Christ, including children, are to engage in some form of ministry. Baptism signifies belonging to Jesus Christ and includes the expectation that people will join him in mission. Then there is a call to a vocation, some to ordained leadership. The call to leadership involves both the ordained and the non-ordained. The ordained have a particular life long calling to serve in leadership and are acknowledged by the church. Spiritual leadership as exercised by the ordained includes being a focus for the community and also encouraging and equipping others in their discipleship.

Seeking reconciliation and renewal is the fundamental task of ministry (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). It is a vision to change the world. The goal is to be part of God's transforming purposes.

Ministry includes:

- proclaiming the gospel, inspiration,
- worship, focusing on God, prayer and discernment,

- pastoral care and pastoral oversight, standing alongside people, being available, seeing people with Jesus' eyes,
- teaching the faith, equipping and empowering people for ministry and mission,
- leadership in relation to small groups, fostering spiritual growth,
- being able to share faith, speaking God's word to situations,
- serving the world, relating to the changing cultural context.

Resource Ministry has partly grown out of a rediscovery of teamwork. Interpretation of what is required in a particular context is part of ministry, for there is the need to identify where healing or reconciliation or change is needed. This is a corporate not just an individual responsibility. Team ministry is hard work involving togetherness, mutual submission and humility, checks and balances, generosity, and respect. Team ministry includes shared responsibility, mutual support, and a collaborative approach. In Resource Ministry, as in all ministry, there is the negative possibility of intimidation, sexism, offence, manipulation and undermining occurring. Resource Ministry in working with teams necessarily accepts challenges, questioning and creative tension. It seeks to assist people to be Christ's missionaries in their context and to serve in harmony with others.

Resource Ministry as an important form of contemporary ministry

Resource Ministry requires a particular form of leadership. It involves suitably skilled ordained ministers and non-ordained leaders giving special attention to the equipping and encouraging role that is a part of all ministry. It resources the people of God to be able to discern and engage effectively in God's mission of renewal and reconciliation. The goal is to be part of God's mission in the world not simply to keep congregations going. The main context is doing ministry through the local church as God's basic instrument for mission. There are similarities between cluster ministry involving a number of congregations and large regional churches as the resourcing of people for ministry is essential in both. While all effective ministry has a resourcing component, Resource Ministry accentuates the equipping role and a team approach. It assists local congregations to have both a missional dimension and intentional mission activities.

Resource Ministry involves helping people to do ministry and live out their discipleship. It is a supportive, training and encouraging ministry. Much of the Resource Minister's pastoral care takes the form of mentoring people in their discipleship and ministry. It grows passive Christians into active disciples. It enables and empowers people to exercise ministry. This often involves removing barriers to ministry. It is not "for" or "on behalf of" but "with" people. It aims to empower and resource the whole people of God, though in practice there is the need to focus on some, namely leaders and potential leaders. It follows Jesus' model in this. Resource Ministry includes identifying, developing and adapting user friendly resources. The ordained minister involved in Resource Ministry has to be willing to "let go" of many things in order to focus on resourcing others. Nevertheless, such resource ministers need also to be points of referral for difficult ministry. Part of what resource ministers need to do is to assist people to discern their boundaries and when they need to refer people to those with greater expertise. The presbytery has a role to play in this also.

Society and attitudes to church have radically changed so past practices that worked previously need to be changed and new approaches adopted. Resource Ministry asks,

what is the church called to be and do? The ordained minister cannot be and do everything, with others limited to a support role. Resource Ministry shifts the weight of ministry skills, namely gives emphasis to the task of building people up in order to serve. It is a different form of leadership requiring a transformational style. It seeks to inspire, educate and provide individual consideration. It celebrates individuals' gifts and passions while fostering teamwork.

What is God saying to the church at this time?

There have been massive social and financial changes in the world which means that the church has to change its ways of functioning. Future shock continues to affect us all. So we need a major rethink in relation to our expectations of the gathered community and ministry agents. God is telling the church to get on with the real task of fostering discipleship and engaging in Christ's mission (Matthew 28: 16-20, Luke 4: 16-20). The church is called to be a community of diverse people working co-operatively. We are to leave behind our church culture approaches and become God's local missionaries. Our relationship with God is primary for we need to function out of an intimate relationship with God and live as disciples of Jesus Christ. People more than institutions are central. Resource Ministry emphasises enabling people to function as the whole people of God serving God's reign. There are implications from Resource Ministry for all ministry in our denomination and for our ecumenical relations. Resource Ministry is a response to the calling of God to be God's people and engage in mission as disciples of Jesus Christ led by the Spirit.

Notes

David Bosch was a South African who was unfortunately killed in a car accident. His book, *Transforming Mission* is recognised as a seminal work.

Douglas John Hall is a Canadian theologian who addresses the current post Christendom context in helpful ways and writes with clarity.

Kennon Callahan through his writings and conferences in Australia has been very influential in the Uniting Church. He is an American church consultant with a PhD in theology. He calls congregations to be about making a difference in people's lives and engaging in outward looking mission in their communities.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry is one of the most significant papers produced by the World Council of Churches.