

Spiritual Formation for Ministry in the Context of the Anglican Church of Hong Kong

John L. Kater

Summary

Reflecting on his experience teaching 'Spirituality and the Practice of Ministry' in a Hong Kong Episcopal Seminary, John Kater describes the joys and challenges of his experience as a Western theologian in an Asian context.

This is an article about a new approach to spiritual formation for ministry undertaken with students at Ming Hua Theological College, the seminary of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui, HK-SKH), where I have been privileged to teach each spring for several years.

As the emeritus professor of ministry development at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (the Episcopal seminary in Berkeley, California, one of the participating schools of the Graduate Theological Union), I have been working for over two decades with American seminarians as they plumb issues of ministry. To my current job I also bring six years of experience as Education Officer for the diocese of Panama, an equal amount of time teaching in a Spanish-language ministry development program in the Episcopal diocese of California, and more than a decade of parish ministry in a small city in New York. In the spring of 2013 I was invited to teach a course entitled "Spirituality and the Practice of Ministry" at Ming Hua. It was designed for students in the Master of Theology (MTh) program during their last term of residency just prior to their ordination and their final year, during which they are assigned to work as assistants in congregations and also to write the thesis which is required for graduation. Producing and

John L. Kater, Professor Emeritus of Ministry Development, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, 2451 Ridge Rd , Berkeley, CA 94709; Visiting Professor, Ming Hua Theological College, Hong Kong, China (Email: jkater@cdsp.edu/).

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2855

© Copyright 2014 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

All rights reserved.

offering a program of spiritual formation for about-to-be-ordained students in Hong Kong was a significant challenge for a number of reasons. The substance of this article will have little meaning without some understanding of the nature of those challenges for both students and this instructor.

THE COURSE: LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

One of the primary limitations on the design and implementation of the course is that while the students are Hong Kong Chinese, as its instructor, I speak no Cantonese. All reading materials, classroom discussion, and written work must therefore be in the students' second language. Ming Hua is a bilingual college, with worship in both languages, informal conversation mostly in Chinese, and academic work primarily in English. (This reflects not only the history of Hong Kong and its Anglican community, but also the fact that it is an international city and students are expected to be able to function pastorally in English as well as Cantonese.)

Another primary limitation has been my own limited experience of living and working in Hong Kong. I have been spending part of each year at Ming Hua Theological College for the last six years, but that is scarcely adequate exposure to a cultural context to presume any deep understanding of its complexity.

The course was therefore constructed on the assumption that while I can provide "generic" resources for reflecting on spirituality for ministry, the task of interpreting those resources critically for Hong Kong's context would fall primarily to the students. On the other hand, this has the potential for creating a learning environment in which the paradigm that "all are teachers, all are learners" takes on extra significance.

Another important assumption that shaped the construction of the course was my belief that spirituality is not a category of ministerial activity—something to be isolated and examined like any other component of ministry—but rather an underlying dimension of all ministry, reflecting the relationship with God, with oneself, with others, and with the creation in and through which ministry takes place.

Yet another assumption reflected in the course design was that the Church's ministry, wherever and under whatever circumstances it takes place, is the sum total of all that is done, by individuals and communities, to serve God's mission. In that sense, it sees all ministry as service of the reign

of God, the “new creation” for which Jesus lived, died, and was raised and for which we still hope and pray.

“Spirituality and the Practice of Ministry” took seriously the assumption that ordained ministry is not something that happens apart from the ministry of the whole people of God, and must therefore be undertaken with a spirit of collaboration and a commitment to what English-speaking Anglicans have become used to calling the “ministry of all the baptized.” I have emphasized this collaborative understanding of ordained ministry in all my teaching at Ming Hua, both in the course I taught to incoming first-year students (“Introduction to Christian Ministry”) and more recently in a course entitled “Polity and Ministry,” which explored the relationship between the way the Church’s internal life is structured and the ways in which its ministry is understood and practiced.

Finally, the approach to spiritual formation for ministry around which this course was shaped reflects a perception that the ordained ministry is functional, in the sense that there are certain specific roles to be played within the context of the congregation or worshipping community. However, alongside the focus on those functions there is also a dimension to ordained ministry that has to do with clergy character and identity. I do not shape this assumption in the language of the traditional debate over whether there is an ontological dimension conveyed by ordination, but rather in the language of a recognized identity—it is not so much that the person takes on a particular character or identity at ordination, but rather that ordination is conferred because the community has discerned the character and identity that accompany gifts for ordained ministry. In other words, discernment is not only about recognizing potential but also about acknowledging gifts already present, and ordination is less about conferring than recognizing identity. Needless to say, this approach has profound implications for the spiritual dimension of ordained ministry.

THE COURSE: AN OVERVIEW

In constructing a course devoted to spiritual formation for clergy, I identified eight functions of the ordained ministry, each of which has an important spiritual dimension. The course was structured to devote one week to each of these primary functions. However, before students began to focus on the various functions identified with the ministry of the ordained, they spent two weeks discussing the character and identity of the priest or pastor. One

of the primary resources for this reflection was a book by two well-known theological educators in the Church of England, Christopher Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, *Being a Priest Today: Exploring Priestly Identity*. In their book, the authors draw heavily on the history of ordained ministry from Augustine and Gregory to the so-called "emerging church" to identify significant aspects of clergy identity and the spirituality that supports them. Their book enabled the class to discuss the experience of vocation and the spirituality of a clerical identity within the broader context of the ministerial, or priestly, community of the church. It also emphasized the importance of a ministry of reconciliation as integral to the priestly vocation and identity, a ministry with multiple dimensions including the clergy's own relationship to God and to the congregation, individually and as a community of faith, and (perhaps most difficult of all) as an agent of reconciliation in situations of brokenness within the community itself.

The other primary resource for the discussion of clerical character and identity is my own small book, never published, entitled *On Being a Priest*. This book is a series of reflections on my own work as a theological educator for the Episcopal diocese of Panama from 1984 to 1990. *On Being a Priest* uses a multiplicity of stories drawn from my experience with my students in both rural and urban settings in Panama during the last years of the Noriega dictatorship and ends with a description of ministry at the time of the American invasion of Christmas 1989. While the stories were written in such a way as to preserve confidentiality and disguise the identity of the chief characters, all are based on real clergy and situations. The book was written to offer American Christians some insight into the nature of ministry as it is illuminated by the experience of Christians in the setting of the Latin America of the 1980s, marked as it was by poverty, oppression, violence, and fear. In assigning the book as a resource for future clergy in the Anglican Church of Hong Kong, it occurred to me that just as I hoped that the story of Christian ministry in the Central American context could offer insight to American Christians, it might also be helpful in highlighting aspects of ministry sometimes overlooked in the context of Hong Kong. This did in fact prove to be the case.

The early chapters of *On Being a Priest* deal specifically with aspect of clerical identity that were particularly in evidence as clergy went about their work under the ominous shadow of a military dictatorship: the inevitably public nature of the clerical identity, vocation to ordained ministry as a gift,

and the perception that who we are as clergy shapes all our relationships, even when we are not particularly aware of that fact.

The course's focus on ministerial functions began with the ordained person as pastor, specifically the pastoral relationship between the priest and individual members of the congregation. (It should be noted that while the HKSKH uses the Chinese word "priest" in its official formularies, the customary Cantonese term and title for that order of ministry is "mok si," made up of the characters for "shepherd" and "teacher".) The pastoral function can therefore be considered as the primary, perhaps even the defining, function by which this order of ministry is recognized. Discussion of the pastoral dimension of ministry drew on sections of Henri Nouwen's *Creative Ministry* as well as Herbert Anderson's unpublished outline, "The Empathy Process." Nouwen's perspective places pastoral ministry within the context of a covenant community rather than on a needs-based model similar to that underlying social work, therapy, or psychology. Anderson defines the nature of that community in terms of empathy, which emphasizes the uniqueness of each person's story and the importance of creating space for those stories.

The functions to which the next two weeks were devoted were "the priest as leader" and "the priest as empowerer." These two classes focused directly on the role of the clergy as leader of a congregation, not of followers but of laypeople clear about their own calling to ministry in the church but especially in the world.

The next two weeks were devoted to functions of ordained ministry related to that concept of a congregation: "the priest as teacher" and "the priest as preacher" with emphasis on teaching and preaching as aspects of the deepening and broadening of the congregation's awareness of its vocation. Those topics were followed by two weeks during which we examined the role of the clergy in the wider community, "the priest as evangelist" and "the priest as prophet." Finally, the last week of the course was devoted to "the priest as celebrant," the particular sacramental role which helps define the ordained ministry.

Resources for this approach to the functions of ordained ministry and the spirituality that undergirds it are drawn from a variety of traditions (Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Roman Catholic), including work by Thomas Groome, Henri Nouwen, and William Willimon, and based on the experience of Christian ministry in a variety of settings in various parts of the world.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR MINISTRY AND THE CLASH OF CULTURES

While a Western observer might have found few surprises in the design of the course under discussion, in the context of Hong Kong it proved to be every bit as challenging, both to instructor and students, as I expected it would be. The first challenge was how to “bridge the gap” between the perspective of the teacher and the reality in which the students would be ministering: How to create a learning environment in which different expectations could be the raw material for mutual learning rather than an experience in missed communication? But in fact, this was only the first of the challenges. As it turned out, every single aspect of ministry we examined turned out to raise serious cultural differences and require the negotiation of those differences before mutual learning could occur.

Hong Kong Chinese identity shares much in common with the West, and indeed has often been described—correctly, I believe—as a ‘hybrid’ identity. Many aspects of western cultures—some superficial, others less so—co-exist with more traditional understandings or compete with them. Nevertheless, it remains primarily an Asian, and specifically, a Chinese identity with millennia-old assumptions that have shaped it. The Confucian perspective that lies behind much Chinese culture is inherently hierarchical. The stability of the community, whether with reference to the nation, the neighborhood, the congregation, or the family, is of primary importance. The well-ordered community is one in which each person recognizes their place and their duties in relation to those placed above or below them by factors such as age, status, or relationship. All other relationships are secondary to those of the family, reflecting the central place of ‘filial piety’ in Chinese culture. Not only congregational life but also relationships between clergy and laity are influenced by the significance of multiple networks of family ties. Of course other networks of relationship are also significant: personal relationships such as friendship; relationships within the congregation; professional relationships with other clergy, both those of one’s own denomination and of other churches; and often relationships shaped by other church-related institutions such as schools. Traditional Chinese spirituality tends to be practiced within the framework of this hierarchical vision of reality, and the spiritual achieving of knowledge or wisdom provides a kind of “upward mobility:” the person whose spirituality reflects the wisdom attained is especially honored.

Deference to one's superiors, whether defined by hierarchy of age, knowledge, or authority is one aspect of this tradition that significantly impacts the practice of ministry. Chinese culture remains profoundly uncomfortable with the assumptions of a western-style individualism that rewards difference, encourages the awareness of individual gifts, and has no problem in speaking of the traits that mark out our individual identity. It emphasizes reticence in talking about or otherwise calling attention to oneself; it is considered more virtuous to remain a quiet member of a group, and to call attention to those traits that make one unique or "special" is an occasion for discomfort. Perhaps one of the aspects of many Asian cultures best known in other parts of the world is the concept of "face," the concern of individuals to appear to others in the best possible light—one of the primary traits of all cultures where human failings are perceived primarily in terms of shame.

Taking these cultural differences into consideration, it is easy to see the danger implicit in such a course: the risk of very significant discomfort on the part of students who are being presented with an approach to the spirituality of ministry well beyond their 'comfort zone' or the framework within which they will be practicing their ministry; the possibility of dismissing the course's content as irrelevant in Hong Kong; and the danger of perpetuating a colonial approach to professional education that assumes that western ways of doing things are inherently superior. How to avoid these pitfalls?

I believe that without two elements, the course would have failed, perhaps on all three counts. The first was the formation of a community of trust and mutual respect between instructor and students which broke through some of the rigidity of traditional Chinese pedagogy. This course was the third semester the students had worked with me. I had taught them a course in "Introduction to Ministry" in their first semester, in which I had not only emphasized that we were a community of teachers and learners, but made every effort to model and encourage a more relaxed environment for discussion. This included inviting (but not requiring) that they call me by my first name rather than my title, spending time apart from the classroom, including a meal almost daily with them, keeping the classroom atmosphere informal in every way possible, taking seriously the importance of affirming their input, asking them frequent questions about how what I was saying resonated (or not) with their own experience, and encouraging them to challenge both the course content and my own contributions. By the time the students arrived at this course, we had a common history of mutual learning. One important part of this process was helped by the written assignments, each of

which gave students the opportunity to respond to the questions, "What aspects of the reading are relevant to priestly ministry in the HKSKH? Why? In what ways? How does the context of Hong Kong affect or challenge the relevance of the readings?" The students' responses to these questions, both in writing and in discussion, provided much of my own learning. But more importantly, they affirmed the importance of context in appropriating the course material, it valued their judgment about the relationship between the two, and it acknowledged the reality of cross-cultural differences.

The second element of the course which was crucial to its progress was the shared assumption that all Christian ministry is in some sense counter-cultural. Trained as they were in traditional parish settings, where the practice of ministry and the relationship between clergy and laity were primarily hierarchical and clergy-centered, they had been exposed through earlier courses to the "ministry of the whole people of God" rather than a more traditional understanding of ministry as "what the priest does." They had come to believe that such a concept could, if accepted, broaden and deepen the ministry of the HKSKH. Prior to finalizing the outline of the course I asked the students to let me know what they were particularly concerned to discuss in the course of our semester together. They specifically asked that we spend some time on how the clergy can help laypeople to understand and claim their own ministries. While approaching leadership in the context of a congregation on the way to understanding itself as a ministering community is a challenging innovation, they had become convinced of its importance.

The primary text for addressing the concept of a "ministering community" was Ann Rowthorn's book, *The Liberation of the Laity*. This work, which seemed radical when it appeared in the United States two decades ago, borrowed the rhetoric of Latin American liberation theology to analyze what its author considered the oppressive nature of clergy leadership and to argue for a church in which laypeople have been "liberated" to take their rightful place in the Church's ministry. This concept, which has not yet been universally taken to heart by American Episcopalians even decades after it was introduced, is profoundly counter-cultural for Hong Kong Chinese Christians who are accustomed to acquiescing to their clergy. Students found her analysis of the dynamics of church life to be a challenge, but were able to recognize the possibility inherent in a model of ministry that affirms the role of lay ministry in transforming the world.

Given the HKSKH's very extensive social ministry, Hong Kong Anglicans certainly understand the importance of this facet of the Church's work,

but it is generally perceived as something that others, generally professional social workers, actually perform. This course took as a given the fact that every Christian has a ministry to transform the world, which may be exercised at home, in school, in the workplace, in the neighborhood or community, in commerce, or education, or politics—and fundamental to such a sense of lay vocation is an awareness of the gifts given each person for ministry. The students had already explored this concept in the New Testament through passages such as Romans 12 (“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.”). They had also participated in a session on “gifts discernment” using the techniques developed by Jean and Bernard Haldane, which depends on individuals articulating their own strengths and abilities in a way which is profoundly counter-cultural in Hong Kong. The students affirmed that speaking clearly about their own strengths and gifts flew in the face of their cultural emphasis on humility, but they recognized that it had given them a new clarity about their own ministry as well as demonstrating how laypeople could be given the voice to affirm their spiritual gifts.

A challenging approach to the spiritual dimension of ministry came from discussion of a chapter of my book on priesthood that is entitled simply “Being Human.” It emphasizes that our own sense of who we are profoundly influences how we exercise our ministry, and that is as it should be. Two aspects of our humanity that receive special emphasis in the text—and that preoccupied the students in class discussion—were vulnerability and failure. The more the clerical role is conceived in relationship to the congregation, the more the clergy become vulnerable. Vulnerability and failure are closely linked in experience and perceptions, and failure may happen because the clergy make honest mistakes, because they can’t or don’t know or notice what would prevent failure, when the clergy behave in inappropriate or unworthy ways, or when fear or other emotions prevent them from acting in congruence with their calling. The experience of failure comes dangerously close to “losing face” and was perceived as a difficult but valuable dimension of ministerial identity; students suggested that perhaps our experience of vulnerability and failure can bring us closer to our congregation, who obviously must deal with similar experiences.

One student described his wrestling with these concepts in these words:

Trying to avoid pain is our human nature and it is echoed by our society... Our call as a priest, however, is to be with [people], sometimes suffer together with them, and to help them to find their ways through the tough

time and the storm in their soul. A readiness of being vulnerable among the people should be kept in our mind while at the same time attend[ing] to our own limitation for not going too far and burnout...

In Hong Kong, people are getting more and more alienated from one another. Reconciliation alone "draws the oppressed and the oppressor, draws strangers together." If we as priests also give up on bringing different ends of the society together, avoiding our call of bringing about reconciliation, who would take charge of it?

In the end, the concept of ministry taught in this course calls into question the hierarchical nature of relationships within the Christian community. It sought to describe how clergy can serve as educators, empowerers, and leaders in a community of equals. It attempted to offer a vision of preaching, pastoral, and prophetic ministry in which the priest is spiritual guide and companion rather than a set-apart authoritarian figure. It saw spirituality not as an ascent towards headier heights, but a deepening perception of the bonds that hold Christians together in the Spirit.

One student described the awareness of the spiritual dimension of this ministry:

On the one hand, priests try hard to lead the people to the destination despite that the challenges they bring may cause unpleasant feeling among the congregation. On the other hand, priests have empathy for the congregation even during the time the priests are challenging the congregation for their well-being. For me, this is a kind of pastoral care I long for and I think this is not about knowledge and skills, it is about the breadth and the openness of my heart. It once again directs me back to my spirituality which is my relationship with God. Only God can help me to be the kind of pastor I myself long for.

CONCLUSION

Ministry in a city like Hong Kong must inevitably confront the clash of values represented by one of the centers of world capitalism and its relentless pursuits with the values of Christian faith. The class discussion of the prophetic role of the clergy was painful and difficult, because all of us are at once members and products of our own culture as well as its critics. In the high-energy atmosphere of Hong Kong, calling into question the motivations and priorities of those with whom we minister is risky. The students agreed that of all the dimensions of ordained ministry we discussed, this was the most challenging.

“Spirituality and the Practice of Ministry” proved to be the most demanding, and the most rewarding, of all the teaching I have done in the context of East Asia. Students were often intrigued by considering new ways of approaching ministry, such as those encountered in the “emerging church” movement in Britain and North America, even as they recognized the difficulty of applying such models in their own context. I have noted how considering the approaches to ministry offered in this course sometimes required enormous courage, and in the course of the semester I developed great respect for the students’ willingness to take the risks to explore how the materials we were considering might enrich their work in the context of Hong Kong.

In our work together over the course of a semester, there were moments of mutual enlightenment, times of real struggle to find ways to express ourselves and our concerns to each other, heart-warming episodes of honest sharing and of finding common ground—and yes, many, many stories from us all, with not a few laughs and poignant memories. In the process, I believe that all of us learned in a new way the aspects of ministry and of church life that transcend cultural difference, even as we clarify the multiple dimensions of our life together where diversity demands different responses and styles of ministry. By the end of our time together, all of us had learned even more of the splendid diversity that marks our life with God, with the People of God, and with each other.