

IDENTITY AND THE RURAL MINISTER¹

Kenneth Dempsey

La Trobe University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

In studies I have made of religion in small Australian country towns I have found that the minister's identity as a minister informed all aspects of his life. Whatever activity he participated in — attendance at a Rotary meeting or playing a game of tennis — he was perceived as a minister. He may have become other things as well to those who got to know him: such as an enthusiastic participant or 'a good bloke for a parson' but no one ever lost sight of his occupational identity and rarely did other people let the minister forget about it for long.

In such ways the minister's work identity became his public identity (Finch, 1983: 70-72) and by so doing helped set him apart, or marginalise him to a significant degree (Mol, 1976: 31-34). Furthermore, this apartness joined with other factors to ensure that the minister's work identity largely controlled his understanding of himself or his self identity. As one minister in my sample put it: 'I find I cannot put my life into compartments in this community. Being a minister seems to affect all I think and do: my family life, my friendships, my activities in the town, even on holidays I find I cannot forget that I am a minister'.

Yet despite work being the basis of his self identity, it appeared that it frequently offered few rewards and a good deal of emotional and mental punishment. So for example, by marginalising him, it interfered with him realising his need to belong (Mol, 1976: 32). Other fundamental needs often went unmet and heartfelt aspirations were denied. Delineating some of the factors responsible for the situation I have outlined, as well as some of its manifestations, are major purposes of this paper. More specifically, I will attempt to answer three questions:

- i Why did the minister's work identity become equated with his public identity and the focal point of his self identity?
- ii Why did his work often fail to satisfy a number of basic needs and aspirations or allow him to affirm values and use skills which were for him intrinsic elements of his identity?
- iii What were some of the effects of these outcomes on the minister's sense of identity, his sense of belonging, and his integration into the parish community?

In dealing with these questions I will assume that a minister's self identity is at the same time, a stable and fragile phenomenon. Stability is emphasised in Bellah's definition of identity. He says it is 'a statement of what a person or group is essentially, and as it were, permanently' (Bellah, 1965: 1973 quoted by Mol, 1978: 2). I am assuming that a minister will attempt to hold onto and express, in a particular parish situation, those understandings of himself that he has distilled from previous roles, group memberships and socialisation experiences with which he most closely identifies. But I am also assuming that there is a certain fragility to a minister's identity, a point that is emphasised by Mol and others (Mol, 1976: Ch. V; Breakwell, 1978). Wrong points out that a stable identity arises from a 'secure anchorage' in social groups and 'firm attachments to social roles' (1976b: 88).

Such social links and supports may be disrupted when a minister is geographically mobile. If this happens and there are no similar memberships and roles in the new context he may try and create a working environment that is compatible with understanding of himself or is compatible with the self he aspires to be. Such actions may threaten the identities of the lay people and the integration of parish life and will therefore be resisted (Mol, 1976: 32). Finally, I am also assuming that ministers will need evidence that their efforts as ministers are worthwhile if they are going to sustain their identities. Where there are few tangible or objective signs of the worthwhileness of their efforts they will be reliant on the positive evaluation of others (Gergen, 1970: 57). However, these will not be forthcoming if his actions challenge the factors supporting lay identities and the identities themselves (Mol, 1976: 57).

DATA SOURCES

The data I am utilising to deal with the questions I am posing has emerged during the course of research on minister/lay relationships in a number of rural communities in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia (Dempsey, 1983, 1985). Through interviewing and observing laymen and ministers I have obtained information on the beliefs, values and behaviour of twenty Protestant ministers. All of these worked for some period of time during the years between 1950 and 1985 in at least one rural community. Nineteen of these ministers were stationed in towns with populations of only two or three thousand people. The twentieth lived in a provincial city. This city and the towns functioned as service centres for the surrounding farming districts. Their Protestant churches were peopled and led by farming and business families and, to a much lesser extent, by professional families.

WHY DID THE MINISTER'S WORK INFLUENCE SO GREATLY HIS SELF-IDENTITY?

This was partly because the ministry was viewed as a vocation or calling given by God. This calling was formally recognised by the practice of ordination for what was called by church leaders, local lay people and the ministers themselves: 'the full-time work of God'. All but one of them stated that they had no choice but to enter the ministry or priesthood. A number said that they had entered despite feeling that they were not personally suited for or attracted to many of the things ministers had to do such as administering an organisation of considerable size and working for so much of the time with people. Here is the kind of thing a number of them said to me: 'I was very happy in the job I had before I commenced training. I was a carpenter and I think I really preferred to work with tools and materials than with people. There are always results for you to see. But God would not leave me alone. I continually resisted the idea of entering the ministry but in the end I could resist no longer'.

For all but one or possibly two of these ministers, the view they held of their work — at least initially — was similar to the view that most people traditionally held of marriage: it was to be a life-long commitment. Such a commitment helped confirm the centrality of the minister's work to his sense of identity. It also helped set ministers apart from laymen: an apartness which was reinforced by the belief that a minister's calling was to a life of sacrificial and honorific service in which the needs of others were to take precedence over his own needs and even those of his family (in Dempsey, 1985). In the communities in which I have conducted most of my fieldwork I have found that ministers were expected to be more than

fair in their dealings with others, to refrain from participating in local gossip, to avoid 'playing favourites' and to be above reproach in their personal behaviour and manners. The small size of the communities and their possession of effective gossip chains added greatly to the pressure these expectations brought to bear on the ministers. For example, they were criticised for drinking and smoking or for doing these things to excess, for losing their temper, for failing to be friendly towards all, for transmitting information about individuals they had been given in confidence and so forth. Such pressure not only set men apart but made it impossible for them to escape their work identity, both socially and psychologically.

The inability of a minister to clearly distinguish his private life and time from his work life and time had a strong influence on his understanding of who he was. This was not a nine to five job. It went on for at least six days of the week and usually invaded many of a minister's evenings and frequently his 'so-called day off'. The scrambling of his work identity with other identities such as those of father and husband was increased by the minister's work activities being conducted in the home or from the home. So, he often worked over lunch and in the evening held church meetings in the lounge-room. All such practices and activities highlighted for the minister the feeling that first and foremost: 'I am a minister'.

The notion 'I am a minister' could be so motivating for members of my sample that they would sometimes ask their wives and families to make considerable sacrifices in its service. For example, one minister's wife told me that her husband had asked her to forego the chance of her and her young children living in a modern well-heated manse on the grounds that he could not reconcile such comfort with his calling as a minister.

Some minister's children recounted incidents during interviews which showed that their fathers related to them primarily as ministers. By so doing the ministers confirmed their work selves as their 'real selves'. Here is what one minister's son said: 'Dad could never forget he was a minister. I was almost terrified to bring home a new playmate because he would ask him almost the moment he met him whether he went to Sunday School and whether his parents went to church'.

Despite the centrality of a minister's work to his life and to his self identity, it often seemed that this work did not yield many intrinsic rewards nor satisfy a range of basic needs such as those for approval, self esteem, a sense of continuity in his identity, for the achievement of meaning from his work and for a sense of belonging. Why was this?

Two of the most important contributing factors were the diffuse and intangible nature of the job.

A DIFFUSE AND INTANGIBLE JOB

The parish ministry in the communities from which I have drawn my sample was a general practitioner type ministry entailing preaching, leading worship, administering the sacraments, presiding at marriages and funerals, counselling, house visitation, a wide range of administrative responsibilities, sometimes responsibility for fund raising and often responsibility for a number of educative functions such as teaching, giving religious instruction in school and 'filling in' as a Sunday School teacher. As I have pointed out, the minister was to be above reproach in his personal behaviour. The most crucial expectations centred on his personality, personal style, and pastoral activity and on his responsibility for the local cause. He was to be approachable, a good mixer and one who took a personal interest in local people. Furthermore, he was usually perceived as being ultimately responsible for the viability of the church at the local level, organisationally and financially. (I will return to the last-mentioned issue later).

No individual could hope to excel in all the things I have just outlined. Furthermore, how could he objectively measure his achievement in many of these areas: for example as a pastoral visitor or counsellor? Obviously he was dependent on the subjective response of his 'clients' and even if they approved of his actions they often failed to let him know. Consequently, for much of the time the minister was left 'in the dark' about the value of his contribution. Such ignorance could generate uncertainty about his worth as a minister. Some laymen said that they were reluctant to praise the minister because they believed he was well-paid for what he was doing. 'Why should he be looking for praise all the time? We don't get praised every time we bring in a good crop. Isn't the minister the man who is supposed to be concerned about what other people are doing and not be so wrapped up in himself?'

Although laymen might be slow to praise they were often quick to complain if things were not done to their satisfaction. In communities with small populations the news of any 'failure' on the part of the minister was quickly communicated to lay leaders and ministers were frequently asked to explain their behaviour. It is true that ministers did not attach the same salience to all activities they were expected to engage in. Accordingly, criticism in some areas was not as likely to have as negative an impact on their identity as criticisms in other areas. But it is also true that in a context where, for much of the time, they did not know how they were going, apparently trivial criticisms could assume monumental significance. Such criticisms not only caused a great deal of emotional pain but could threaten a man's attachment to the ministry or what he regarded as his real self.

The chances of criticism having such an impact were heightened by the fact that laymen often moved from criticising an alleged failure of a minister in a particular area to condemning him as a minister. So I have often heard statements such as the following: "Once Mr. Jones introduced politics into the pulpit I was finished with him. I won't go back to church until he leaves this town".

The threat that such criticism could pose to a minister's identity, especially when it was made in a public context, is borne out by the response of one man who resigned after he was accused of "pulling the Bible to bits" in his preaching. His accusers said that his preaching is causing people to leave the church. The minister said: "I thought to myself, to hell with them! This isn't just this congregation, this is my whole future. In parish after parish I would face the same problems. I could never satisfy such people and if I did, it would only be by selling my soul, so I quit".

INABILITY TO ACHIEVE TANGIBLE SUCCESS AND IDENTITY

The ministers in my sample were no more likely to receive tangible signs of their worth than they were comments of approval from the lay people. All of them were living in communities whose populations were declining, primarily because of the mechanisation of farming. Support for the churches was also eroded by the impact of the process of secularisation that has had a negative influence on church life generally in the Western world. In each of the centres from which my sample has been drawn, there has been a dramatic decline in church attendance, organisational activity and financial buoyancy in recent years. For example, one church was forced to amalgamate with another to avoid bankruptcy. In two other churches, over the last twelve years, attendance at worship has fallen by about two-thirds, the youth clubs have disappeared and the Sunday Schools declined dramatically in size (Dempsey, 1984).

Such developments have particular relevance for the stability of the minister's sense of identity and for his integration into the local group. This is especially because

it is often believed that ministers must bear major responsibility for the success or failure of the local cause. Such beliefs are almost always held by local lay people, and often by denominational leaders and ministers themselves. When questioned on this matter, some ministers rejected, with a considerable show of emotion, the idea that "I am the Church". But even these ministers could not rid themselves of the idea that if they were somehow "better ministers" they would be able to "turn the tide" of decline. Guilt feelings of this kind are not surprising, given the strength of the nexus in our culture between responsibility and monetary reward. Many ministers and certainly a majority of lay people whom I have interviewed have pointed out that it is the minister who is paid to do the work of the church and it is therefore his special responsibility that it survives and ideally flourishes.

Laymen hold strongly to the belief that there is a direct relationship between the quality of a minister as a preacher, pastor, and a person who can relate effectively to people and the success or failure of the local cause. These convictions were constantly articulated in the presence of the ministers of my sample. Their articulation made its impact as the following comment illustrates: "I suppose I am in part to blame for the financial problems the church now faces. If they had liked my preaching those people probably would not have left". These words were uttered by a minister whose preaching was being blamed by some lay leaders for people who had been strong financial contributors leaving the church. As Rawls observes: "Our self respect normally depends on the respect of others" (1971: 178; quoted by Rosenberg: 603). This man's self esteem has been affected both by the criticism and the feeling of at least partial responsibility for the financial problems of the church. In fact his sense of identity has been so threatened by his experience in the parish ministry and he now feels so estranged from a number of key leaders that he is trying to find alternative employment.

As far as my sample as a whole is concerned, the constant worry over finances and organisational decline wore most ministers down. It significantly reduced the degree of satisfaction they drew from their jobs, sometimes lowered their self-esteem and sometimes caused them to leave the ministry altogether.

THE MINISTER'S EXEMPLARY BEHAVIOUR, HIS VISIBILITY AND IDENTITY

I have already shown in an earlier section that the expectation that the minister's behaviour would be beyond reproach and that he would put the service of others before his own needs added significantly to the pressure causing him to view his ministerial life as the fulcrum of his self-identity. What I am suggesting in this section is that such expectations — which were quite unrealistic ones — markedly reduced the rewards he got from being a minister; especially when that ministry was being practised in small communities where his behaviour was highly visible. So ministers found small failings were publicly paraded, often causing a loss of respect which in turn dented their self-esteem. Ministers were criticised for: playing golf on their day off when they still had not visited some members of the parish for the first time; singling out some parishioners as "special friends"; neglecting the manse garden; dressing untidily or losing their temper during a debate with lay leaders.

The minister who is working in the provincial city told me that the large nature of the centre has given him some protection from the scrutiny of lay people and therefore reduced the bases for criticising him but the limited nature of this protection is borne out by the fact that he has recently asked his Board of Management to place him on a three-quarter stipend so that he can spend time legitimately on non-

parish activities that he finds personally rewarding. He said: "There can be no argument now about me taking time out to do some teaching or writing". That remains to be seen.

The visibility of ministers and the existence of the expectations I have just described combined with the ability of lay people to sanction ministers, sometimes formally and often informally, prevented many ministers from doing things which would have off-set much of the stress of their work or provided alternative sources of recognition and improved self-esteem.

DIVERGING PRIORITIES AND MINISTER'S IDENTITY

The chances of a minister's pursuit of job satisfaction and other rewards being productive was often lessened by a difference between himself and lay people over priorities. When this occurred, approval of some ministers was withheld and others were strongly criticised because they treated as of only limited importance or no importance at all, aspects of their job that had great salience for lay people.

The activities that were most likely to be assigned different priorities were pastoral visitation, discussion group activity and youth work. For example, in all parishes, there were church leaders who gave top priority to youth work, especially if they had children of youth club age themselves. They usually believed that unless the church provided a suitable environment, their children would fall into "bad company" or drift away from the church. So ministers were often put under considerable pressure to lead a youth group. However, in a number of instances the ministers ignored the pressure because they were not particularly interested in doing youth work or because they felt they lacked the skills to do it well. Hence one minister, when asked if he would lead the youth group his predecessor had established said: "I don't feel it is the kind of thing I am best suited to do. My interests lie in other directions. I will be making some changes to the worship and I hope to get a number of house churches going. We're all different you know. We all work in our own special ways".

This man's explanation was not accepted, however, and the people who had made the overture quickly communicated his response to other members of the church. Before very long the rumour circulated that the minister was not interested in young people and that caused a number to ask if he was a suitable kind of person to be a minister after all. These criticisms and queries reached the minister himself, they occurred at a time when other attacks were being made on aspects of his ministry. He reported to me that as a result he felt estranged from the congregation. He said: "I cannot be myself here, I don't belong here!" Soon after he resigned from the ministry.

Another minister who also resisted pressure to lead the youth group did so for different reasons. This man's approach highlights another source of alienation and threat to identity that could arise in parish work. In such instances, these problems arose for ministers because values, beliefs or practices they needed to implement to be true to their sense of identity, conflicted with crucial lay values or practices and thereby threatened the identity of lay people and sometimes the integration of the congregation or parish.

CONFLICTING VALUES AND IDENTITY

The minister I just referred to was convinced that the youth club along with church organisations generally was impeding the achievement of fundamental goals of his work as a minister. He believed the problem with most organisations in church life was this: they shifted the emphasis from the congregation as a whole to special

interest groups and syphoned off energies that could have been devoted to breaking down barriers between male and female, young and old, prosperous and poor; energies and resources that could have been used to build up the congregation into a corporate body of caring people. This minister's stance drew a lot of criticism. After all, he was threatening the identities of many lay people by failing to support or by criticising activities that they had been closely involved in for many years. He too was estranged from his parishioners to some degree by this conflict. Yet he at least had the satisfaction of "affirming his principles in this matter". Often however, he was not successful in implementing programs with which he closely identified. He shared this problem with the majority of ministers in my sample. They also found themselves in parish situations where laymen resisted or were indifferent to ideas or plans that were of fundamental importance to their sense of identity. The nature of such ideas and plans did vary from minister to minister but many of them could be seen as expressing one or more of the following facets of identity. These were the convictions that: "I am an educator"; "I am a liturgist"; and "I am a pastor to pastors".

Almost all ministers in my sample believed that their calling and training equipped them to educate others. Here is how one of them expressed his belief: "When I went to X-town I was determined to educate people. I was sick of people rejecting the Christian faith on spurious grounds so I set out to prepare the way for replacing the morning worship with an all-age Sunday School and I used the pulpit to try and get people to think along the right lines". It was clear from my conversations with this man and with most other ministers, that their personal sense of well being as well as their identity as ministers depended to a significant degree on successfully engaging in educational activity. Usually however, their hopes and needs were not satisfied. For example, the all-age Sunday School lasted only one week because of opposition from powerful people.

Virtually all ministers attempted to get discussion groups of one kind or another going. Usually they were only attended by a few people and lasted only for a short period of time. The reaction of a minister of the 1980's to this type of lay response was very typical of what most ministers had to say on the matter. "I just cannot get them to attend a study group yet they really don't know what their Christianity is about and it seems they don't care." (All this was said with a considerable display of emotion.)

A minority of ministers, about eight in all, did attempt one or more forms of liturgical reform. Most of these attempts were criticised and in a number of instances they had to be abandoned. Almost always they generated a good deal of ill-feeling between the minister and at least some members of the congregation. In some instances they apparently caused members of long-standing to stop attending church. None of these outcomes helped ministers achieve the sense of identity they were pursuing. They estranged them from the congregation at least temporarily and reduced their sense of belonging.

Probably the ministers in my sample had the least success in the third area I singled out for comment: this was their attempt to encourage their lay people to be pastors on the premise that they (the ministers) were called and trained to fit them for such activity. So, for example, in the early 1980's the Council of Elders of one Uniting Church was generally neglecting its commission to share with the minister pastoral oversight of the parish and of its members. Only a handful of its members were, for example, visiting families that had been placed in their pastoral care. This type of response disappointed the ministers and also frustrated their attempts to wrest meaning for themselves from their jobs. This was also often frustrated by the experience and reaction of ministers' wives.

THE ESTRANGEMENT OF MINISTER'S WIVES AND THE MINISTER'S SENSE OF IDENTITY

Minister's wives were almost as vulnerable to criticism as their husbands. In the communities in which I have worked they were greeted on arrival with extensive and demanding expectations. These included presiding over or at least attending one or more women's organisations of the parish, assisting with fund-raising activities and running what was called an "open parsonage". The latter expectation meant they were to welcome and entertain whoever cared to call, whatever time of day or night. Like their husbands these women were often trapped by the breadth and demanding nature of lay people's expectations of them, particularly as they occurred in a context in which they were highly visible. The chances of them being found wanting were increased by the fact that a majority of them rebelled at least partially against these expectations. So ministers who could not turn to friends and colleagues for day to day psychological support because they were too geographically distant often found that their wives were unable to give them the support they badly needed as well. Actually seven of the ministers in my sample said that the serious problems their wives experienced in parish work helped them come to the decision to leave a particular parish or to leave the ministry altogether.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this paper I have examined some of the reasons for the minister's work having such a large bearing on his sense of identity. At the same time I have tried to show that his work can frustrate his attempts to affirm or implement some of the more salient aspects of that identity. As a result his commitment to the ministry can be undermined, his need to belong can be thwarted and he can reach the point where he believes he can only hold onto his understanding of who he is by withdrawing from the situation or by giving up the vocation.

The major purpose of the paper has been to highlight the factors that can bring about such outcomes. However, in order to avoid overstating the case I must emphasise that things did not always work out as badly as they have appeared in the body of the paper for at least some of my ministers. For example, three said that their parish experiences had been, on the whole, quite worthwhile and another seven said they had found them tolerable and at least in some ways worthwhile. Predictably, those most likely to have perceived their parish experiences as worthwhile were those who had adopted a comforting and accepting rather than a challenging approach. They also had wives who happily embraced the traditional role of "the unpaid curate". These ministers were prudent enough to desist with a practice or a proposed change that was generating so much resistance as to put their ministry or the unity of congregational life in jeopardy. These three provided an excellent sample of how a sense of identity can be sustained because of the effect of what Mol calls symbol based elements. In this instance among the more pertinent of these were "... predictability of motivations and responses, common adherence (by ministers and lay people) to values and norms, common interpretations of experience ..." (1976:8). So, although strangers, the ministers generally avoided threatening the identities of lay people or the social identity and integration of the congregation (Mol, 1976: 32-33). Accordingly they were perceived as "one of us" and so their need for a sense of belonging was at least partially met. Seven others had a more tenuous relationship which oscillated between marginalisation and a fair degree of acceptance and integration. There was not the same affinity concerning values, norms

nor the same degree of predictability of motivations. But these people did adapt to some extent their understanding of themselves to suit the needs of the situation.

As I have emphasised, for about half the ministers in my sample the outcome was quite different. The values and plans that were among the most salient features of these people's sense of identity conflicted to such a degree with those of the lay people that they were strenuously and successfully resisted. It seemed that these ministers (and usually their wives) constituted too great a threat to the social identity and order of the lay community and often to the sense of identity of leading individual members. As for the ministers themselves: for most of the time they failed to receive any positive signs of the worthwhileness of their efforts. In the majority of cases their parish experience so estranged them from the laity and so threatened their sense of identity in a global sense that they left the ministry. Sadly, despite the enthusiasm and sense of purpose with which these people arrived in their parishes they never really ceased to be strangers in a "strange and alien land".

ENDNOTE

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