

## **Book Review by Laurence Bennett**

### ***The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People***

**Ray S. Anderson, 1997, Westminster John Knox Press**

The word 'ministry' brings to mind a multitude of complicated themes, yet Anderson writes in order to answer the foundational question of 'what is ministry?'

*The Soul of Ministry* is Anderson's attempt to record the theology of ministry he has spent his career developing as he prepared students for ministry. He presents his work in six distinct parts:

1. Ministry as Theological Task,
2. God's Ministry in Covenant and Creation,
3. Jesus' Ministry to the Father on Behalf of the World.
4. The Spirit's Ministry through Jesus for the Sake of the Church
5. The Church's Ministry to the World on Behalf of Jesus
6. Leading God's People in the Ministry of Christ

Anderson writes in a provocative and challenging way, and whilst this book is not a contemporary work, it is highly relevant in providing a robust theology for anyone who seeks to 'do' ministry in contemporary society.

The book tackles a number of large theological themes and has a wide application; however part one is particularly relevant for defining ministry.

Anderson proposes that ministry is a theological task and suggests that it operates as theological discovery, discernment, innovation and praxis.

*Discovery* - the discovery aspect of ministry that holds to the essential bases that 'all ministry is first of all God's ministry' (p5).

*Discernment* - biblical texts are the authoritative word of God, and discernment must be used to apply to a contemporary context with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (p16).

*Innovation* - Anderson identifies that new theological conclusions must be reached as a result of ministry, he gives the example of Jesus ministering on the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28) and that God's purposes for humanity will be done (p18). Anderson notes that for every innovation there is an antecedent, we are not inventing but

reshaping. Jesus' innovation was a reshaping of the theology of the Sabbath to establish its original purposes as Gods' ministry for the benefit of humanity (p23).

*Praxis* - a move from practice to praxis is required to avoid 'the mere application of truth or theory' (p26). Praxis is action that incorporates purpose into the process; this demonstrates a 'discernment of the ultimate purpose or goal that is becoming evident' (p27).

Swinton and Mowat describe practical theology as the 'critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world' (Swinton, Mowat 2006:6). This expresses thoughtful consideration of the process of theological praxis which Anderson identified: a critical process which interacts with profound purpose - God's ministry in, to and for the world.

Anderson identifies that 'theology has the task of expounding the revelation of God' (p6). Theology says something about God, and the church illuminates this revelation in its action. Theological theories and skills are helpful in this action but vastly more effective when engaged in the dynamic of praxis.

For all Christian practitioners there is a word of caution, that whether we are aware or not, the ministry we perform reveals something about God. For example: the involvement of children in church life activities. What we uphold will communicate something about the nature of God, so if we exclude children from certain practices, we may be portraying that God is only accessible to those who meet the age criteria (p8). For practitioners the use of praxis is vital to avoid such a misrepresentation.

To participate with Gods redemptive plan is to be prepared to be a part of the revelation of God. 'All ministry is first of all God's ministry' (p5), it is our privileged participation in God's ministry as we are called to a praxis of ministry that innovates, discerns and discovers. The trust of this book is that ministry is a theological task. It is where a reshaping of our theological assumptions happens as we encounter and reflect on our ministry experiences.

Those looking for a 'how to' book for everyday Christian ministry will be disappointed. However, those wanting to dig deeper with theological tools that

shape practice then this book will challenge you to greater levels of authenticity as you partner in God's action in, to and for the world.

### **Bibliography**

Anderson, R. (1997) *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leader's for God's People*,  
Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press.

Swinton, J. and Mowat, H. (2006) *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*,  
London, SCM.