

THE WAY SUPPLEMENT

FORMATION FOR MINISTRY



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FORMATION FOR COLLABORATION

By KEVIN KELLY

DURING THE Second World War 'collaboration' was a bad word. It meant helping the enemy. In the post Vatican II Church 'collaboration' is far from being a pejorative term. It could even be described as an essential characteristic of the Church. We see ourselves as called to be a collaborative Church. By baptism we were all enrolled as collaborators. For prospective new adult members of the Church, the RCIA programme is a gradual initiation into collaboration.

Literally the term 'collaborator' means co-worker, an expression used by Paul himself of those who shared with him in the work of spreading the good news. Vatican II is strong in its insistence that we are all co-workers in the Church. In fact, the very life of the Church consists in 'co-work'. Its prayer life finds its highest expression in liturgy which means the 'work of the people'. That is why participation in liturgy is given top priority in the Constitution on the Liturgy. Its teaching, preaching and prophetic role is recognized as one which is shared by the whole community. At the level of the governing function in the Church, the post Vatican II terms which are now in common parlance are 'collegiality', 'co-responsibility' and 'subsidiarity'. These are all terms belonging to the collaboration stable.

Actions speak louder than words. The real test of whether the Church believes in collaboration is not found in its official statements but in the way it lives its life and organizes itself for mission and maintenance. The charge of collaboration will only be sustained against the Church if its liturgy is truly participatory, if its mission of teaching, preaching and prophecy takes full advantage of all the gifts of its members and if its leaders respect and actively promote collegiality, co-responsibility and subsidiarity within the Church at all levels, internationally, nationally and locally.

Formation for collaboration is not primarily about seminary or ministerial training. In the first instance it is about forming an attitude of mind within the whole Church. Although structures are important and bad structures can seriously impede collaboration, collaboration itself involves a definite attitude of mind. Admittedly, the main evidence that such an attitude of mind actually exists

will be seen in the practical organization and life of the Church. It is also true that one's personal appreciation and understanding of what collaboration really means will only develop and deepen to the extent that one begins to live and work collaboratively. Nevertheless, there has to be a kind of inner conversion to collaboration if the whole process is ever to start moving. This is part of the conversion called for by Vatican II.

The seeds of collaboration are already present in our Church and in our local communities. In some instances these seeds have already germinated and are producing much fruit. On balance, however, collaboration has hardly been a hall-mark of the Roman Catholic Church in recent centuries. To a large extent formation for collaboration will involve re-formation of the Church itself. This needs to be a reformation of our attitude of mind and also of our structures, organization and relationships. Both must necessarily go hand in hand. At its most basic level formation for collaboration is about this dual process.

Collaboration should be effective in every facet of the Church's life and mission. Formation for collaboration is therefore a vast subject and one that cannot be treated adequately in a short article. Consequently I would like to limit myself to looking at just two examples of what collaboration implies for the Church. One example is drawn from the life of the universal Church and touches on its mission of teaching and evangelization. The second is more specific and looks at collaborative ministry in the local Church. In both instances I am only highlighting certain features on the canvas. Though these features are important, I would not claim that they are the most important features at each level and they are certainly not the only features on the canvas. I have chosen them simply as interesting examples.

Formation for collaboration—the universal Church and its mission to teach and evangelize

The Church's mission of teaching and evangelization is essentially a collaborative mission. When we talk about 'teaching', we naturally think of someone called the 'teacher' passing on knowledge, information or skills to other people called the 'pupils' or 'learners'. The word 'teacher' focuses on what the teacher is doing. It makes his activity the major ingredient in what is happening. If a teacher knows his material and puts it over clearly, then the responsibility rests with the pupils if they fail to learn.

For many years that is how I thought of teaching. I taught; my pupils were taught. A few years ago, as a result of a course on the processes of adult learning, I underwent a kind of copernican revolution in my

understanding of my role as a teacher. I came to realize that I was working within the wrong frame of reference. The principal frame of reference is not 'teaching', but 'learning'. Our main concentration must be on the learning process. If no learning occurs, no real teaching is taking place, however well the teacher might think he is teaching—and however excellent his material might be objectively speaking. A firm grasp of this point is essential if we are to understand the Church's mission to teach (and evangelize) as essentially a collaborative venture.

The Church is not a community divided into two groups, the teachers (the pope and the bishops) and those who are taught (the rest of us). That kind of presentation was a nineteenth-century innovation and went very much against the more traditional and biblical notion which saw 'learning' and 'teaching' as two activities involving the whole Church. As Christians we are all learners and as Christians we are also all teachers. Unpacking that statement might help us to appreciate the collaborative nature of christian teaching.

As Christians we are all learners. This immediately calls to mind the words of Jesus, 'You must not allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one teacher, the Christ' (Mt 23, 10). We are all believers. We are all equally dependent on the Lord for the gift of faith, be we pope or peasant. At this level we are all equal—and at this level, strange though it might sound, we all share equally in the charism of infallibility. This is the infallibility of the Church in believing.

There is a certain dynamic element at work in any group gathered together to share in a learning experience. In the Church it is the Holy Spirit who is the dynamic element in the learning process. That is why the Church needs to have a basic trust and confidence in its internal learning process and should allow it to take its natural course.

The heart of this learning process does not lie in the passing on of correct teaching from one generation to the next. Revelation is not a block of objective knowledge which was committed to the apostles by Jesus and which is passed down from age to age. Bishop Butler remarks that 'a revelation is not fully given until it is received'.² In other words revelation is a living reality which occurs in every generation in the sense that the process of selfdiscovery in Christ has to be worked through by the Church in every age and in each culture.³ The Word of God being received and appropriated in each generation is the living process of revelation.

As Christians we are all teachers. There is a sense in which that is true within the learning community of the Church. We all share our faith with each other and thus help on the growth process in the body of the Church—parents, teachers and catechists doing this in a very crucial way.

By virtue of our baptism we also share in the missionary function of the Church. 'Go and teach all nations' is a word of the Lord spoken to all of us. This is put forward very forcefully by Paul VI in his Apostolic Letter, *Evangelization in the modern world*, following the 1974 Synod of Bishops. He writes: 'Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn' (n 24). In this letter the pope seems to opt for the learning frame of reference rather than the teaching one. 'In fact, the proclamation only reaches full development when it is listened to, accepted and assimilated, and when it arouses a genuine adherence in the one who has thus received it' (n 23). Therefore, in our role as teachers, as evangelizers, we need to be very aware that the core of evangelization does not lie in what we do but rather in what happens in the hearts and minds of those with whom we are trying to share the gospel. We are not defending the gospel against the enemy; we are sharing it with people who deep down in their being are hungry for the word of God.

Where does the teaching authority of the pope and the bishops fit into all this? Again it depends on whether one adopts the teaching frame of reference or the learning one. If one goes for the former, both the pope and the bishops are thrust into an impossible position. To be competent teachers they would need to be one-man universities embodying in themselves all the expertise of theological, biblical, moral, philosophical, pastoral and historical disciplines. That kind of teaching competence would be humanly impossible. However, it is completely different if learning is accepted as the prime process. Then teaching is seen as a leadership role within (not outside) the learning process. The teacher remains one hundred per cent a member of the learning community but his function is to facilitate the learning process within the community.

What would be the main functions of teaching authority within the Church if it is interpreted according to the learning frame of reference?

First of all, a 'learning' teaching authority will be conscious that ultimately there is one teacher in the christian community and that is the Holy Spirit, the life-giving spirit of truth which Christ has breathed into his Church. This Spirit permeates the whole Church and so the teacher will not see himself as the repository of all wisdom and knowledge or as having some kind of 'hot-line' to God. He will see himself very much as a listener, trying to discern all the riches of the Spirit's wisdom coming through different members of the community. And when he

discerns the voice of the Spirit, coming from whatever quarter, he will see it as part of his role to enable that voice to be heard as widely as possible in the Church.

Secondly, a 'learning' teaching authority today will be open to the riches of the Church's self-understanding as articulated in Vatican II and so will be conscious that the Spirit-guided learning community must not be restricted to the Roman Catholic Church. Speaking of non-Catholic Christians, *Lumen Gentium* (n 15) says that 'to them also the Holy Spirit gives his gifts and graces and is therefore operative among them with his sanctifying power'.⁴ (Cf also Decree on ecumenism, n 3). And even outside the gathering of christian believers, the learning process is going on and the Spirit of God is active. This is implicit in Vatican II's Declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. Moreover, speaking of the whole movement among peoples directed towards promoting deeper respect for the human person, *Gaudium et Spes* (n 26) comments: 'God's Spirit, who with a marvellous providence directs the unfolding of time and renews the face of the earth, is present in this evolutionary process'. (The phrase 'is not absent from' in the Abbot translation does not do justice to 'adest' in the latin text). So if the Church is to exercise a teaching function in the world, it must first play a listening role since in every age and culture the heart of revelation must be clothed in the best riches of the world's true self-understanding.⁵

A third element in the role of the 'learning' teaching authority is the willingness to join in dialogue. Dialogue is an essential part of teaching according to the learning model. It is a dialogue partly directed towards listening and learning and partly towards sharing one's own beliefs and convictions. Dialogical teaching does not need to claim certainty for all its utterances. There can be a danger in the Church of thinking that all pronouncements by teaching authority ought really to be infallible or at least one hundred per cent certain! Since pronouncements relevant to current issues can hardly be infallible, the Church is forced into a 'Catch 22' situation—either it keeps a deafening silence or else it claims a level of authority for its statements which they will not bear. This need not be the case if a teaching pronouncement is offered as dialogical contribution within the learning community. A strong, well-presented and carefully agreed statement which tries to express as well as possible christian thinking on a current issue can play an important role in the dynamic of the learning community. The Peace and Economic Pastoral letters of the United States bishops are a striking example of this process in action.

A fourth element in the role of the 'learning' teaching authority in the Church will be the function of articulating the community's grasp of the

truth when this has emerged with sufficient clarity and agreement. This, too, demands attentive listening and careful discernment. Part of this listening and discernment will be directed towards earlier teaching. In saying this I am not suggesting that teaching cannot develop or even change. There is no denying the possibility of development of doctrine or even of change of teaching when we have outgrown mistaken notions in certain matters related to the truths of christian faith. This has happened, for example, with regard to some aspects of our understanding of human sexuality with the consequence that the teaching of Vatican II shows a definite change from the teaching of the patristic age and succeeding centuries. Nevertheless, we cannot deny our past. If our teaching has developed or even changed, this must be acknowledged and the reasons for it understood. We are unfaithful to christian tradition if we refuse to accept the possibility of development or change. Christian tradition is something alive and active. Healthy development and change is collaboration with our christian forbears, since it is keeping alive the tradition they handed on to us.

Would it be fair to say that a fifth element in the role of teaching authority is the function of prophet? If by prophecy we mean a special gift of being able to interpret the signs of the times, I would not link that with the role of the teacher, even though I would gladly admit that many teachers in the Church have exercised this prophetic gift. I would prefer to say that part of the teacher's role is to listen for the voice of the prophet and then enable that voice to be heard as widely as possible. The calling of Vatican II by Pope John XXIII was a classic example of this. Perhaps John XXIII was not a prophet himself but by calling the Council he enabled the voices of some of the great prophets of our day to echo round the whole Church—and far beyond as well.

What about dissent from authoritative teaching in the Church? Provided it is not touching the heart of our christian faith and so dealing with truths believed and taught infallibly, there is room for dissent. Even here of course, the way we interpret dissent will depend on whether we are thinking within the teaching or the learning frame of reference. In the teaching model, dissent is seen as a rejection of the teaching put forward—'You, the teacher, are wrong. You are in error'. Understood in this way dissent usually involves confrontation between teacher and taught. Nevertheless, traditional theology allows for such dissent in exceptional circumstances, though it was thought that it would only happen rarely. In the learning model, dissent is not a confrontation with the teacher. It is much more an expression of collaboration in the Church's teaching. It is claiming that the articulation of this teaching put forward by the teacher does not do justice to the full riches of what the Church really believes. A good indication as to whether a particular act

of dissent is justified will be found in the reaction of the rest of the community, especially those most intimately involved in that specific issue, whether as practitioners or as teachers. That is why the 'non-reception' of some of the Church's teaching on sexual and marital issues cannot be dismissed too easily. As Cardinal Hume said at the 1980 Synod of Bishops, the experience of christian married couples is a genuine source for the Church's exploration of the theology of marriage.

Collaboration in the Church's mission of teaching and evangelization is a privilege and responsibility of us all. The Church will be 'formed' for collaboration in this aspect of its mission when the voice of the Spirit is heard and listened to, through whomsoever it speaks and from whatever unlikely quarter it might come.

Formation for collaboration— The local Church and team ministry

If collaboration is primarily an attitude of mind, so too is team ministry. Structures are needed, certainly, but these structures will be ineffective without an underlying belief that ministry is a collaborative venture and as such calls for team ministry in some form or other. How a team ministry gradually takes shape is part of what formation for collaboration means in the context of a local Church.

Team ministry can come in various sizes or shapes. With the right attitude of mind a priest on his own in a parish can be involved in team ministry if he believes that the whole parish community is potentially a team ministry and that the actively involved members of the community are already a team ministry in the making.

My own personal experience of team ministry has been in Skelmersdale New Town. If the Roman Catholic Church had followed its usual pattern of organization, Skelmersdale would probably have been made up of three separate parishes, each with its own parish priest. However, a deliberate decision was made to organize the Church in Skelmersdale on a team ministry basis. Consequently, instead of three separate parishes there are seven smaller eucharistic communities. Each community has its own Sunday Eucharist; in four of the communities this is celebrated in their primary school since only three communities have their own church building. The whole Church in Skelmersdale is served by a team of four priests and six sisters but every community relates in a special way to one particular priest and sister. The seven communities have a life of their own, yet they are all conscious that they belong to the one Church of Skelmersdale. Interaction and cooperation between the communities happen in various ways, helped by the weekly team meeting and by the regular meetings of the Skelmersdale pastoral council on which all communities have elected representatives. There is

a good spirit of team work among the actively involved members of the different communities.

The above is clearly an enthusiastic and glowing account of Skelmersdale. I do not apologize for that, though I recognize that the situation still leaves much to be desired and many aspects of church life there might well be open to criticism. The ecumenical scene, for instance, is far from satisfactory, though this is partly outside local control. The Roman Catholic Church's official position on intercommunion creates problems for any effective form of ecumenical team ministry. Despite this and other problems, the Roman Catholic Church in Skelmersdale is certainly a serious attempt at forming a collaborative Church and the whole community can feel that their efforts, however painful at times, have not been in vain,

Collaboration means working together. We can only work together if we have a common purpose in mind. A team needs to be agreed what it is about. The rest of this article will focus on what is commonly referred to as the 'mission statement'. This is a policy statement formulated and agreed upon by people working together in collaborative ministry. I am convinced that some kind of agreement like this is crucial if a collaborative Church or team ministry is to work effectively and with a reasonable level of personal satisfaction and mutual support for its members.

A few years ago the whole roman catholic community in Skelmersdale was involved in looking at the kind of Church they believed they should be. This was an important and helpful exercise. A lot came out of it. Briefly, all agreed that they wanted to be a caring and sharing Church—not just for themselves but for the whole town. They believed that an essential element of their mission was to join in helping to make Skelmersdale itself a caring and sharing community.

Encouraged by this common mind, the priests and sisters making up the team ministry felt it was important that they themselves should agree on some kind of 'mission statement' which would commit them to the kind of ministry appropriate to the Skelmersdale Church with its common mind and faced with the daunting problems of a new town with widespread unemployment. They felt this was especially important since changes in personnel were constantly occurring and so the team was in a continual state of re-formation. Such a 'mission statement' would be invaluable in recruiting new team members. Although new members would bring in their own gifts (and to that extent each would further enrich the 'mission statement'), it seemed crucial to recognize that any priest or sister who could not subscribe to the 'mission statement' would not be an appropriate person to minister within the collaborative Church of Skelmersdale.

I would like to end this article with the full text of the Skelmersdale team ministry's 'mission statement'. A lot of sweat and blood went into reaching this common mind among the team. With their permission I offer it as an example of a very valuable and almost indispensable aid in forming a team who want to work a collaborative ministry. Every 'mission statement' will be unique since every situation in which ministry is exercised is unique. Nevertheless, every 'mission statement' must try to answer at least four basic questions: 1) what do we believe is the Church's mission? 2) what are the particular characteristics of our local situation in which the Church's mission has to be carried out? 3) given this particular situation, what kind of local Church do we need to be? 4) what are the implications of this for us as full-time ministers?

What follows is the Skelmersdale team's attempt to answer those four questions. I think all of us involved at the time (May 1985) found it a painful but very formative exercise.

Mission statement of the Skelmersdale Team Ministry

'By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity' (Lumen Gentium, n 1).

As a team we commit ourselves to the vision of the Church's mission as found in this statement from the second Vatican Council. The Church is called to be a sign which points to the good news that God loves every man, woman and child on this earth and that we are all truly one family. With *Gaudium et Spes* (n 40) we also believe that the Church shows this love particularly by her sharing in the work of restoring human dignity, strengthening the bonds of society and giving a deeper significance to people's everyday activities. Thus, the Church's very existence is in and for the world, created and loved by God our Father. The Skelmersdale Church shares that mission but has to live it out in the specific context of Skelmersdale.

Skelmersdale New Town has a population of some 43,000 people. They have the same needs and aspirations as other men and women throughout the country. In addition, Skelmersdale has its own particular features of life and these give rise to special needs and hopes.

The title of a recent report puts very succinctly the reality of life for many people in the town, 'Skem—the broken promise'. Many individuals and families who came to Skelmersdale drawn by the promise of employment and a better quality of life had their hopes dashed by the failure of industry to expand as first envisaged. The above-mentioned report states: 'On those estates which were

specifically built as New Town development, there is an unemployment rate which is above thirty-two per cent overall, with an even higher rate among males. In the worst affected area (Digmoor and Moorside) unemployment is running at about thirty-five per cent overall, with a male rate of almost forty-three per cent' (pp 30 and 19). As a consequence, there is bitterness, loss of self-confidence and a sense of direction and also an experience of powerlessness for many people in the community. Inevitably, family life is put under severe strain in such a situation and the impact on young people is a special cause for concern. High youth unemployment is a factor which causes many young people to seek to establish their adult status through parenthood and/or independent living, for both of which they are unprepared. Living under these kind of pressures can easily leave people depressed and apathetic. As 'Skem—the broken promise' notes, that in itself can create a potentially explosive situation. Naturally, this is not the whole picture of Skelmersdale. Not everyone is unemployed. There are plenty of people living comfortably in the town and there are even areas of relative prosperity. Probably some Skelmersdale people have no direct experience of the harder side of life in the town and would not recognize the picture just painted.

Moreover, there is a very hopeful side to life in Skelmersdale. In a recent report prepared for the Liverpool Archdiocesan Pastoral Council the local church community spelt out its grounds for optimism. A great deal of effort is directed to community building activities. On the part of many groups and individuals in the town there is a very deep commitment to working to improve the quality of life in Skelmersdale. In the local communities there is a real sense of caring and, at times, a very tangible experience of being cared for. There is a spirit of openness, humour and resilience among people. While many of the people who have come to Skelmersdale from Liverpool maintain their links with family and friends in the city, they have no desire to move back there. Skelmersdale is now their home. These are all positive human features which help to explain why for many people Skelmersdale is a good place in which to live.

In the light of the above the Church in Skelmersdale has a double task. It has itself to grow as a community. And it has also to work for the growth of the whole of Skelmersdale as a community. Its own members need to feel they are part of a loving and caring community. After all, they belong to the Skelmersdale context and share the same needs as everyone else. But from the basis of their own loving and caring community they must be empowered to work to make a loving and caring community within Skelmersdale itself and its different neighbourhood units.

As a faith community believing in God's love for us and for all people, the Church draws its inspiration and dynamism from this belief. That is why gathering together to celebrate God's love in its different manifestations in life is so crucial to the life of the Church community. The Sunday Eucharist is not a distraction or an escape from life. Rather it renews and confirms the community in its commitment to be fully part of life and to help to transform that life in conformity with the dignity of people so precious in the eyes of God.

In the light of all the above the life of the Church in Skelmersdale has its own unique character.

Quite deliberately it is not divided into separate parishes. It is a town-Church with seven small eucharistic communities. In this way it is hoped that real community building can be facilitated in the different geographical areas of Skelmersdale, each with its own special character. At the same time the unity of purpose of the Church's mission in the town can be preserved.

Being true to the special Skelmersdale context also commits us to a particular style of church life. Pastorally our approach must be such that it affirms and empowers people and we must avail ourselves of every opportunity for this. We are deeply committed to the development of lay leaders and lay ministries and to searching together for appropriate ways of education and formation. We are fully committed to our Skelmersdale Pastoral Council as an important means for communication, cooperation, consultation and sharing responsibility within and between our local eucharistic communities and in the town-Church as a whole; and we will support any move to make the Pastoral Council a more effective means for these ends.

Being at the heart of our community life our liturgical celebrations must be real celebrations and must communicate and kindle the hope, comfort and power of the risen Lord and his total concern for our human life here in Skelmersdale today. The fact that our eucharistic communities are not very large and the people have more chance of knowing and caring for each other enables our liturgical celebrations to be more personal and better rooted in people's lives. This is something we treasure.

We accept, too, the need for both the individual and the church community as a whole to live out the mission to the town community. Naturally, this mission is also similarly shaped by the realities of our special Skelmersdale situation.

As a team we commit ourselves to continue to develop our own awareness and sensitivity to the major problems of our town. We accept that this means we must strive to promote and encourage the involvement of our Church in working for whatever changes are needed

to bring about a satisfactory human solution to these problems. It further demands that we support those agencies and initiatives which seek to empower those who have little or no access to decision-making in areas affecting their own life decisions.

We recognize too that a further characteristic of our mission is that it is one which we share with other Churches in the town. Therefore, as far as possible, we must carry out this mission ecumenically.

An important feature of the special character of the Church in Skelmersdale is team ministry, with a team currently composed of four priests and five sisters.

The team approach to ministry provides support, encouragement and the opportunity for sharing vision and concern on a townwide basis. It enables discussion and planning of common work which can then be interpreted and implemented at local level. It also allows for a broader look at possible responses both at team and local level to issues in Skelmersdale. Moreover, it allows for the strengths, gifts and expertise of the individual team members to be shared by the whole Church in Skelmersdale.

Inevitably there are some disadvantages and tensions in team ministry which need to be acknowledged. Decisions may take longer to arrive at. There may perhaps be less personal autonomy than would be the case in a more conventional parish structure. The priests may feel an inner tension through the fact that the mutual support they give each other through living together (on the very edge of the town) is offset by their being less available in their local communities and by their not sharing the life-style of their own people.

In spite of these disadvantages (and the last-mentioned does not pertain to the essence of team ministry), team ministry has much to commend it. We believe it is an appropriate form of ministry for Skelmersdale. We need to look at ways in which it could develop in the future. In the light of the ministry sector resolution at the recent Liverpool Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, one possible development might be the inclusion on the team of more lay members who might well have special areas of expertise or responsibility, e.g. catechetics, education, finance etc.

Conclusion

Formation for collaboration is about re-forming our attitude of mind in the Church. I have looked at some of the implications of this in two areas of the Church's life—its mission of teaching and evangelization and the way it looks at ministry in the local Church. One characteristic of this collaborative attitude of mind stands out to me as being of paramount importance in both these areas of the Church's life—

respectful and attentive listening in order to empower people to accept fully their own worth and share their gifts for the benefit of all.

Collaboration is impossible among people who will not listen or who seek to dominate others by their power. These deforming attitudes are not uncommon in the Church. That is why reformation is a good word. It denotes the gateway to collaboration.

NOTES

Cf *Lumen Gentium*, n 12.

²The theology of Vatican 11, (London, 1967), p 36.

³Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, n 44.

Cf also Decree on ecumenism, n 3.

⁵Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, nn 44 and 58.

