HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

The role of the creative arts in initial ministerial education

Anne C. Holmes

THE REVD ANNE HOLMES MA is a self-supporting minister in the Anglican Diocese of Oxford. She works as a psychotherapist and is engaged in a professional doctorate in practical theology in Cambridge.

administrator@acholmes.demon.co.uk
Oxford, UK

In this paper, I bring together three concerns: the stress of clergy and the role of the creative arts in the prevention of clergy burnout, the importance of beginnings and the opportunity to establish healthy habits during initial ministerial education. Drawing on my earlier and recent qualitative research, the known therapeutic value of the creative arts and the thinking of Winnicott and other psychoanalysts about the importance of beginnings, I indicate the significance of good role models and suggest that any appropriate change in the formation process needs to be intentional in order to set healthy patterns for ministry.

CLERGY • STRESS • CREATIVE ARTS • FORMATION • CREATIVE REPAIR • EDUCATION • BEGINNINGS • ROLE MODELS • CHANGE

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume I (2015) Issue 1 (Holiness & Education): pp. 89–98

ISSN 2058-5969

Introduction[1]

First, a word about my professional context: for the last 20 years I have been working as a psychotherapist in a variety of public sector and private settings in England. I see individuals, couples and groups. Previously I was a school teacher and counsellor. A 'cradle' Anglican, I was a licensed lay minister. Ordained in 2002, I have served in parish ministry as well as in a variety of chaplaincy settings. I am now engaged in a professional doctorate in practical theology with the Cambridge Theological Federation and Anglia Ruskin University. I am no longer active in the ministry of a particular parish, but am involved in the annual ministry review of clergy and am attached to a community of Anglican nuns.

The broad context for my research is the level of stress among clergy. Notwithstanding the appearance of Coate's key text highlighting the hidden sources of stress in ministry published 25 years ago (Coate 1989), in which she drew attention to the need for more psychological understanding in ministry selection and training, the problem of continuing clergy stress has been described as a 'widespread, deep-rooted and growing problem'.[2] It is increasingly becoming a subject for concern among the Churches, as evidenced by, for example, the report on ministerial well-being that was presented to a recent British Methodist Conference (Tidey 2013). Stress which continues unaddressed over a substantial period of time can lead to burnout. Given the acknowledged significance of the problem in the Churches in the UK, it seems important to consider how it might be addressed in advance during initial ministerial education as well as during the active ministry of clergy.

My particular focus is the role of the creative arts in the prevention of clergy burnout. This research evolved from my MA dissertation, 'Choose your Companions from Among the Best' (Holmes 2009), in which I indicated the value of *creative repair*. Creative repair is regular, active engagement with the creative arts as a way of repairing energy expended in sensitive pastoral care. This idea combines the psychoanalytic idea of *repair* in a here-and-now encounter of the damage done to the psyche in formative relationships on the one hand, and the capacity of the *creative* arts to restore emotional and psychological energy on the other. Various members of the focus group for my MA research indicated that they had experienced or come close to experiencing burnout and that active engagement with the creative arts had either helped to prevent the burnout or had been instrumental in the recovery from burnout.

Evidence abounds for the value of the creative arts in repairing wounded psyches. At a professional level, branches of psychotherapy which have become established disciplines in their own right include art therapy, music therapy and drama therapy. In the popular domain, enthusiasm for singing has increased partly due to the work of Gareth Malone with his formation of various choirs and especially the choir of military wives and later other choirs in various organisational settings (Malone 2012). Not only were individuals helped to become less tense and more confident, but the non-hierarchical nature of the choirs fostered better communication within the organisations. Recently Alain de Botton has made a case for art itself as therapy (de Botton and Armstrong 2014).

In the two years following my MA, I led various creative repair workshops for clergy and ordinands. These seemed to indicate that while the participants found the experience of the workshop restorative, they could not imagine integrating that thinking and experience into their daily lives. I therefore became curious about the blocks to the practice of creative repair and identified feelings of guilt as a possible cause. In 2013, I explored this in a piece of qualitative research and was surprised by the evidence of the particular focus group which considered this. What emerged was the importance of a childhood template in setting patterns of obligation and the need for supportive church structures at times of overload or personal crisis. Those participants who had reframed the habits of childhood had done so with the help of significant others. This resonated with my work as a psychotherapist, as I am often the agent of a process that supports that change that allows the childhood template to be modified via the establishment of new, more appropriate habits for an adult context. This group also highlighted the role of church structures and good modelling by senior clergy in the practice of creative repair. This is relevant not only to the early years of ministry, but also to the initial education process.

Beginnings

I would like to say more about the childhood template and to indicate the importance of new beginnings in later life. One of the important insights of psychoanalysis is the correlation between a sound emotional start in life and our capacity to manage other beginnings.[3] For each one of us any important beginning echoes our very entry into the world at birth. It is perhaps worth

rehearsing what happens psychologically in our early experience. When we come into the world we have to begin the *work* of existence. Whereas in the womb our cells just carried on multiplying and developing and we were fed automatically, after birth we have to breathe and suck and give voice to our needs. We are dependent on others to respond to our needs and we go on developing and growing. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has written about the importance of the 'good-enough' mother who attends to her baby, but does not anticipate her or his needs (Winnicott 1964). It is a sort of dance in which she creates a safe place for her baby which is very intense at first, but gradually allows the baby to gain confidence in her or his own voice. It is the baby's task to train the mother in how much she or he can take in so as not to be left under- or over-fed or stimulated. If the mother is preoccupied with her own problems or not interested in her baby, then this opportunity is lost and the feeding becomes mechanical and partial. Whatever the circumstances, the baby's primary task is to survive and we know from the work of John Bowlby (1979) that there is an instinct to attach to whoever or whatever is available to keep going. As babies we take in whatever there is, so that if, for example, our mother is depressed, we take in the symptoms of that depression. Nowadays neuroscience is confirming what we have known intuitively for centuries, namely that we need to be held and loved and accompanied as we begin to make sense of our experience (Gerhardt 2004).

From this it may be deduced that for many people there may be problems in successfully negotiating other new beginnings, such as going to school, embarking on an important adult intimate relationship and any significant change of job, house move or professional identity. If we have been well-enough accompanied by our parents and significant others, then we will be able to draw on that experience and accompany ourselves through future transitions. This leads me to the third of my concerns, the formation process and the opportunities which it offers for creative repair.

Initial ministerial education

If we accept that our childhood template influences other beginnings, then it follows that beginnings mean that we revert to early templates. The time of ministry training, is, potentially, an ideal time to develop new habits and establish healthy patterns, which could later stand candidates in good stead when they move on to their first ministry posts.

With respect to developing sustainable healthy patterns of life and ministry, my research suggests that engagement in creative repair during ministry formation might help to do this. However, at this time the modelling of good practice and establishment of sound structures for not over-working are paramount. Yet two of my MA focus group members who were involved in the training of Anglican ordinands commented on the difficulty in persuading students to take time off to engage in creative pursuits. This resonates with the observations of Anne Tomlinson. In her monograph *Training God's Spies*, she reflects on her experience of training candidates for lay and ordained ministry in the Scottish Church's Theological Institute. She deplores the 'culture of expediency' which sets in soon after the beginning of the three-year course. Reading becomes directed to the next assignment, rather than 'being a glorious trawl through the uncharted waters of different theological approaches'.[4] The culture of busyness which was also referred to by members of my recent focus group was already established in training and Tomlinson's attempts to persuade candidates to build more leisure into their schedules met with responses such as 'There'll be time for that once I've finished the course'.

She goes on to make a theological case for the crucial role of the imagination, writing:

> It is my contention that the action of the Spirit – this power that makes connections between the extraordinary and the ordinary in our lives, that rouses us into being aware of the Infinite in the finite – is identical to that of the imagination; that the imagination, in other words, is the spark of the Spirit.[5]

While I would take issue with Tomlinson's pneumatology,[6] her passion for the inclusion of creativity in the formation process resonates with my own thinking about the importance of creative repair.

In addition to the impact of childhood templates on beginnings in ministry, there is evidence that those in formation are still being influenced by ministerial role models who had inspired them to explore their own vocation. A recent study by Amanda Bloor explored how a group of Anglican ordinands assessed what it might mean to 'put on' priesthood. Her long-term research project revealed that many of them measured their vocation not against theory or theology, but against the example of priests whom they had known and admired. This was the case whether they came from evangelical or more catholic backgrounds. She writes: 'Whatever the underlying theology, it was

the attractiveness of the example provided by particular priests that drove aspiring clergy to consider ordination. The individuals they had observed became templates of what dedicating oneself to Christian service could involve.'[7] Bloor found that these idealised views of ministry were not usually modified during the formation process. Here we may have a problem. Given that my focus group participants identified a childhood template of duty as being a block to the practice of creative repair and the power of an idealised ministerial template in encouraging vocation, the initial ministerial education provides a crucial opportunity for candidates to develop deep habits of reflection and restoration.

Earlier I indicated that, as a psychotherapist, I am often the agent of a process that supports that change that allows the childhood template to be modified via the establishment of new, more appropriate habits for an adult context. This is a difficult process and usually requires quite a long time in therapy. Thus it cannot easily be translated into the context of ministry formation. Although ministry training, including study and placements, may take several years, the level of self-awareness of ordinands varies and there may not be a perceived need to challenge either childhood templates or even identify an idealised ministerial template. Yet there is some common ground, in as much as the habits of healthy self-care are usually established during a rigorous psychotherapy training. As with ministry training, it is not merely an acquisition of new sets of skills, although that certainly takes place. Rather, it concerns the whole person and requires a commitment to that self-knowledge which will equip the future therapist with the capacity to be an agent of a greater process. In the therapeutic encounter, it is important to be able to work in three dimensions: the personal past of the individual patient, the external world in which the patient is living and the here-and-now encounter between therapist and patient. This can be very demanding on both parties and it is the responsibility of the psychotherapist to resource her- or himself. I have observed that many do so via the creative arts.[8]

If the principle of developing a new template during initial ministerial education is seen to be desirable, it may involve a reframing of the aims of the training process. It also involves a consideration of the process of change. One essential ingredient is the modelling of good practice by theological educators. Higher education generally is suffering from the impact of a culture of targets and outcomes, although some of this has led to an improvement in accountability within learning settings. However, if the formation process is really to impact on early templates in a positive way, then there needs to be

an intentional emphasis on the creation of those habits which will protect candidates from the culture of over-busyness. Educators also need to have examined their own habits, so that they model healthy practice. I would also argue that an engagement with the creative arts could be seen as an essential part not only of ministry but as a way of modelling the full flourishing indicated in the Jewish idea of shalom. Stephen Pattison has written that human flourishing allows for a variety of understanding and is true to the plurality of human well-being.[9]

If healthy habits are established during ministry training, then they need to be refreshed or even re-formed during ongoing ministry as it is lived out in consecutive settings. The need for continuing professional development is recognised in many disciplines and, as a psychotherapist working in a variety of contexts, I am required both to be in regular clinical supervision and to attend lectures or workshops in order to reflect on my practice and develop my thinking. One of the reasons for this is to offer a check and balance against possible dangers to the quality of my clinical work, such as fatigue or some confusion between the needs of a particular patient and my own personal needs. It may be that aspects of a situation or life story trigger memories of something in my own experience.

For example, there was a time when my daughter's life was put at risk when her appendicitis became peritonitis. Soon afterwards I heard about a similar event in a patient's life. I was aware of the danger of identification and good supervision protected my clinical work. This regular supervision means that not only am I accountable to a colleague for maintaining my professional competence, but that I am expected to resource myself appropriately for a sustainable quality of practice and lifestyle. Like many colleagues, I often turn to the creative arts for this, so that I am practising creative repair. The equivalent of this in ministry is continuing ministerial development and in the Church of England there is an obligatory annual Ministerial Development Review for all licensed clergy. This allows the minister to review and reflect on their ministry over the previous year and includes a section on well-being. I would like to see an inclusion of the encouragement of creative repair in this section. This is not, of course, a substitute for the regular oversight of pastoral work. Unfortunately, the importance of pastoral supervision is not yet recognised as essential although there is some evidence (Leach and Paterson 2010) that it is being valued across denominations, although this is rarely allocated adequate funding.

What is being encouraged within the Church of England is the opportunity to engage in further studies, especially during a sabbatical. There is a growing assumption of the importance of 'lifelong learning' (Ward 2005), which perhaps creates a climate in which more self-resourcing in the creative arts could be embraced. Ward has drawn on the work of Gillie Bolton and Jennifer Moon to indicate the value of creative writing as part of self-supervision and reflection.[10] I affirm this approach and in addition I would argue that any active participation in the creative arts would enable the minister to repair those emotional and psychological resources used up in sensitive pastoral care and allow for growth and the facilitation of full flourishing. Increasingly the creative arts are being used as a vehicle for pastoral supervision and personal growth (Leach 2014).

When I have had the opportunity to give a workshop on creative repair to those in training, they have reported that the live experience has resourced them. As the class was in their timetable, they were obliged to take part and gave themselves to the experience in their usual conscientious way. However, they could not imagine practising it in a ministry context. Also one or two of the tutors indicated that they were not modelling good practice.

It seems to me that in the Churches in the western world we have idealised a type of workaholism in ministry. The idea of sacrifice and of 'going the extra mile' has been distorted into a 24/7 approach, mirroring that of our society as a whole. This is perhaps exacerbated by the clergy's knowledge of declining church numbers and an anxiety about failure that closes down essential thinking space into a whorl of activity. Such a pattern can also be seen in other organisations. For example, I am involved in the training of psychotherapists within a variety of settings and, within the National Health Service in England, there is a current devaluing of what I would call essential thinking spaces. If ministry is to have a prophetic dimension, then it must be willing to be counter-cultural. I would therefore argue that as a key beginning for ministry, initial ministerial education is an opportunity for the establishment of healthy habits such as the practice of creative repair.

More comprehensively, I would argue that the process of initial ministerial education is a time to revisit the formative models for ministry and reflect on them, so that the bad habits of our idols do not pursue us. At the end of formal training, ministers will begin their ordained ministry, when they will be even more vulnerable to their early templates. At that time it is to be hoped that their training incumbents or supervising ministers will themselves be

modelling good practice. My hope is that future generations of Christian leaders will be mindful of God's ongoing creative power in our lives and model the full flourishing and wholeness which itself prevents burnout.

Conclusion

I have indicated that there is a concern in the UK Churches about the level of clergy stress, which, if unaddressed, can lead to burnout. In earlier research I developed the concept of creative repair as one way of preventing burnout. My more recent research highlighted the importance of childhood templates in the establishment of habits of obligation. The significance of beginnings and the potential of a prophylactic approach to burnout have informed my view that good new habits might usefully be formed in the process of initial ministerial education. Given Bloor's discovery of the power of an idealised view of ministry based on previous encounters with clergy to influence ordinands, if any change is to take place it needs to be intentional. This may need a review of educational aims and priorities. It also demands of educators that they reflect on and perhaps modify their own working habits in order to model healthy practice. Finally, the process of ongoing ministerial review and lifelong learning could be adjusted to include the practice of creative repair as one way of affirming the need actively to prevent clergy burnout.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this paper was given at the Thanksgiving and Celebration: Formation for the Future conference held in the Wesley Study Centre, University of Durham, 16 and 17 June 2014.
2. Lee and Horsman 2002, Introduction.
3. The general importance of life stages was first considered within psychoanalysis by Freud and has been developed by others, especially Erikson (1950) and Jacobs (1986) among others.
4. Tomlinson 2001, p. 3.
5. Tomlinson 2001, p.17.
6. I consider that her easy equation between the imagination and the work of the Holy Spirit is perhaps an example of exaggeration to make a point. As John V. Taylor (1972) showed us in his pioneering examination of the work of the Holy Spirit, with his idea of the Go-Between God, the third person of the Trinity allows for communication in the here and now. Perhaps more apt a reference to the Trinity within the creative arts is to be found in *The Mind of the Maker* in which Dorothy Sayers (1994) made a comparison between the Trinity and the process of writing.

7. Bloor 2013, p.19.
8. My own training organisation, the Institute of Group Analysis, often puts on film nights and I was at a recent study day on psychoanalytic poetry, put on jointly by the Freud Museum and the Poetry Society. Several of my local colleagues belong to choirs.
9. Pattison 2002, p. viii.
10. Ward 2005, pp. 146–147.

Bibliography

Bloor, Amanda. 'Who shall I be?' Putting on Priesthood in the Church of England' in Ling, Tim (ed.). 2013. *Moving On in Ministry*. London: Church House Publishing. pp. 17–30.

Bowlby, John. 1979. *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Coate, Mary Anne. 1989. *Clergy Stress: The Hidden Conflicts in Ministry*. London: SPCK.

De Botton, Alain and Armstrong, John. 2014. *Art as Therapy*. London: Phaidon Press.

Erikson, E., 1950. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.

Gerhardt, Sue. 2004. *Why Love Matters*. Hove: Brunner-Routledge.

Holmes, Anne. 2009. 'Choose your Companions from Among the Best'. Unpublished MA dissertation. Anglia Ruskin University.

Jacobs, M., 1986. *The Presenting Past*. London: Harper & Row.

Leach, Jane and Paterson, Michael. 2010. *Pastoral Supervision*. London: SCM Press.

Leach, Jane. 'Power and Vulnerability: Creative Supervision and Theological Education' in Chesner, Anna and Zografou, Lia (eds). 2014. *Creative Supervision across Modalities*. London: Jessica Kingsley. pp. 145–161.

Lee, Carl and Horsman, Sarah. 2002 . *Affirmation and Accountability*. Exeter: Society of Mary and Martha.

Malone, Gareth. 2012. *Choir*. London: Collins.

Pattison, Stephen. 'Foreword' in Lynch, Gordon. 2002. *Pastoral Care and Counselling*. London: Sage. pp. vi–viii.

Sayers, Dorothy L. 1994. *The Mind of the Maker*. London: Mowbray.

Taylor, John V. 1972. *The Go-Between God*. London: SCM Press.

Tidey, Tony. 2013. 'Supporting Ministers with Ill Health'. Available at: www.methodistconference.org.uk/media/176392/conf-2013-20-supporting-ministers-with-ill-health.pdf.

Tomlinson, Anne L. 2001. *Training God's Spies*. Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust.

Ward, Frances. 2005. *Lifelong Learning: Theological Education and Supervision*. London: SCM Press.

Winnicott, Donald. 1964. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.