

PART 1: MY RATIONALE FOR ATTEMPTING A REFLECTIVE VOCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

FOR several years I have been considering writing for my own benefit in the first instance what I have thought of as a “reflective vocational autobiography”. Long-standing colleagues who know me well have encouraged me to attempt this self-generated undertaking. They suggested that I do it as a private venture at my leisure in the linguistic style I use in preaching rather than the more academic style of my various publications. So far I have put papers to do with my vocational life in order including reflective notes I have made from time to time and I have jotted ideas down as they occurred. As I did so the realisation of the immensity and complexity of the task was daunting and eclipsed its original glamour. From time to time I thought and talked about the idea but got on with other things! However, the pressure of the inner compulsion intensified and my commitment to respond to it deepened. But I could not get down to a writing programme. I was stuck between the impulse and the awesome implications of doing something about it; somehow I could not cross the dividing line between the inspiration and creative action. This went on for some time until it dawned on me as I was reading some paragraphs on “autobiography” by Richard Hoggart¹ that a way out of my impasse was to examine my inner promptings about writing a vocational autobiography to see whether I could justify giving myself to pursuing their implications. This is what has emerged so far! I wrote it by working as honestly as I could at some questions that I set myself. I believe I did this openly because, whilst one part of me wanted to find convincing justification for proceeding, another part of me would have been relieved if I did not do so. Such a conclusion would, of course, have had its own problems.

What is driving me to this task? Central to the motivating force is an urge to complement my academic study of my ministerial work with a reflective study of the vocational issues of my ministry. My vocational life as a Methodist minister began in 1955 when it turbulently succeeded my career as an engineer. It has been a greatly privileged, undeservedly rewarding and very satisfying ministry even though it has been extremely hard work often stretching me to the limits of my ability and resources and at times seriously problematic. I am profoundly grateful to God for all that

1 Hoggart, Richard (2005) *Promises to keep: Thoughts in Old Age* (Continuum) pp116-117. This section in particular and the book in general gave me the idea of setting out my rationale for doing a vocational autobiography and gave me clues how I might do it.

I have been given to do and for my share in ministry both in the church and in the world and for the ecumenical colleagueship I have experienced.

For forty years my ministry has been devoted to local church and community development work, providing ecumenical in-service training and consultancy services for clergy and post-graduate training in consultancy, ministry and mission. Throughout I have been a reflective practitioner submitting my work willingly to the rigours of action research and writing up my findings in personal notes, internal reports and for publication.² Consequently I have learnt all that I possibly could about the practice, theory and theology of the practice of these disciplines as a Christian minister cum engineer. On the way, quite naturally, I have had new insights into my vocation throughout what has been by any standards an extraordinary vocational experience. However, the sheer pressure and intensity of the work has prevented me reflecting on or studying vocational issues with the same rigour that I have the technical and academic aspects. Inevitably some disquieting issues were not dealt with fully. They return periodically to haunt and disturb my peace of mind. The need to revisit and to reflect on these more rigorously in order to come to terms with them and to find a deeper sense of peace presses heavily upon me. The conviction grows that this is the time to attempt this alluring but difficult task.

Approaching the task through attempting a vocational autobiography is a natural thing for me to do because serious writing is one of several things that consistently makes vital and unique contributions to the quality of my reflective processes. ³Writing helps me to think and feel my way through

2 See website www.avecresources.org for information about this work and related publications.

3 Clearly many things generate and develop new insightful thinking: reading, lectures, sermons, events, incidents, personal and interpersonal experiences etc... Writing for me captures and develops as well as records and reports them. In all the work that I have done with people writing has acted in concert through complementary interaction with three other primary reflective processes: prayerful meditation; insightful conversations with others and myself; diagrammatic modelling. See for example, Lovell, *George Analysis and Design: A Handbook for Practitioners and Consultants in Church and Community Work* (Burns and Oates) pp175-179 and Lovell, George (2000) *Consultancy, Ministry and Mission: A Handbook for Practitioners and Work Consultants in Christian Organizations* (Burns and Oates) pp87-91. Lovell, George (1994) pp179-164; Lovell, George (2000) pp 87-91; Lovell, George (1980/1991) *Diagrammatic Modelling: An Aid to Theological Reflection in Church and Community Development Work* (An Avec Publication 1991 originally published as an Occasional Paper No 4, 1980 by the William Temple Foundation)

things more thoroughly, to be as precise and incisive as I can be, to get to the heart of the matter, to refine my responses and to understand and interpret my experience. It is one of the ways by which the free flow of my consciousness in which, unbidden, all kinds of thoughts and feelings surge around; it helps me to harvest those which are quiet and peaceful and to control, refine and even redeem those which are disturbing, confounding and painful. Similarly, it galvanizes and concentrates all my critical and creative faculties when I apply myself to thinking through things analytically. Beyond doubt it is essential to my being a reflective practitioner and to understanding my context and myself.

In part such a vocational autobiography will, of course, involve putting on paper things already clearly formulated in my mind over the years. But, important and creative as that could be, the writing process to which I am referring is other than that. It is a means of, and an aid to thinking things through, working them out on paper, which I refer to as reflective writing. Writing things down objectifies them for me and enables me to think about them more analytically and critically. False statements and reasoning are exposed and new insights pop up. (A scholarly colleague, Michael Bayley, practised and strongly advocated a two-stage approach to drafting: “get your thoughts on paper without reference to merit” was his watchword, then think about what you have written critically and analytically and amend as necessary.) Finding words and sentences which more accurately and adequately express the meaning I am searching for leads not only to editing or changing the manuscript but, more significantly, affects and represents reciprocal changes that occur in my mind and feelings, my beliefs, my attitudes... as I write. Of itself, therefore, this kind of writing engenders processes that change the script of my life. (An incident comes rushing to mind as I write this. My seven-year old granddaughter, Rachel Slator, was sitting working at one end of my desk whilst I was vigorously crossing out and re-writing as I struggled to draft something. Suddenly I was aware she had stopped what she was doing and was gazing at me open mouthed. When I looked at her she said, “Granddad, you do make an awful lot of mistakes, don’t you!”)

I find that this kind of writing draws on the outcome of other ways and means of reflecting and makes coherent sense of them. It has proved to be one of the most effective ways of developing my ability to pursue to good effect my vocation as a preacher, a pastor, a church and community development worker, a consultant and as a Christian colleague and

friend.⁴At various times it has clarified my mind, brought my feelings under control and challenged me to the core, quietened my soul and restored my confidence. Therefore, I turn to it with confidence that it will help me to explore my vocational experience.

Tackling the task will help me in another way. I simply must write. I need to be writing about something and this is one of two main things on my writing agenda. Writing is an integral part of me. It has extremely positive effects upon me even though it can be tough. I feel better when I am writing; I am much more alive and especially when I am grappling with important realities and searching for words to express them convincingly. This does not mean that I am a good writer even though through writing I can and do generally manage to clarify my thoughts and feelings to good effect but not without difficulty. (One of the things that will emerge if I write this autobiography is that to this day I remain grammatically insecure as a direct consequence of the poverty of my early education and my psychological response to it.) Writing galvanises me to read and compels me to put in better order stacks of personal notes and working reflective papers I have accumulated over the years. The need to do those things is also driving me to this task along with the feeling that I have something to say and want to continue honing my writing skills.

Other questions I set myself were about my ability to write such an autobiography even as a private document and the propriety and possible negative effects of doing so. Several things emerged. Whilst my previous reflective writing indicates that I have some ability and experience for the task there is no certainty that I would be able to complete it. That would depend in part on my energy levels and health over the time it would take. Clearly hose are unknowns. To pace myself I would need to curb and control my propensity to become obsessive about the task and preoccupied with it and the desire to finish it! Necessary as that is, it will not be easy. It would call for a life-style somewhat different from that to which I have grown accustomed. I would need to view it as a long term, if not an open-ended project. Time would be required for relaxed concentration which is required for profound thought, penetrating reflection, sieving⁵ my material

4 Carefully composed letters, for instance, have developed relationships and performed pastoral functions.

5 Cf *Journal Notes* 5.3.09: Autobiography “is hard work... each element, incident, observation should go through a fine sieve. You know that sieving cannot be altogether successful – self-love is tenacious – but you have to try in hope; and put up with the strain on the sense of honesty. Self-justification is always present, so self-censorship has always to be on duty; so long as self-love allows it”. Hoggart *op cit* p116

and qualitative writing. If I did not take these constraints seriously, tackling the task would have negative effects upon people close to me and me. If I adopt the task I would have a full work agenda but as it would be under my own control and free from outer imposed deadlines it would be flexible.

Is the idea of writing such an autobiography a form of preoccupying self-love, of vanity in thinking my life is worth all this attention even if only as an example?⁶ It could be. But things I know about myself make it less than likely. I have a love, hate relationship with myself along with a propensity to denigrate myself. I do not push or parade myself to the extent that I frequently default on presenting myself and taking up my proper position in the scheme of things. This is possibly one of the things that attracted me to non-directivity, but more of that later. I know that I have some distinctive albeit limited abilities but I am inclined to underestimate and understate them and I can be embarrassed by public fulsome references to them. As will become apparent, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority have been a continuous drag on my life. I have had to work hard to contain and overcome them. These honest observations encourage me to think of this autobiography not as an act of vanity but possibly of psychological and spiritual correction and renewal.

These considerations are convincing me that it is right and proper for me to tackle this task and that it has potential. But, are there ways in which I could/should use my energy and time more profitably – apart, that is, from giving more time to my personal and family life to which I am committed? And, if so, what priority rating should I give to the autobiography? I tried but failed to address these questions adequately. Failing to make progress with them, I came to the conclusion that I would be better placed to tackle them when I had got nearer to a decision about the autobiographical project. I am not now sure that I am!

Considering the genesis of the project helped me at this point. It emerges from a stream of my consciousness about what I should do with various tasks which emerge and evolve and are “borne in upon me”- they seem to come into existence without my consciously conceiving them or bringing them to birth, they are borne in upon me from within and beyond me and simply do not go away. As far as I can tell, this is how the idea for this project came into being several years ago and gradually became fixed in my portfolio. During this time it has held its place in a priority queue. Now it has come to the head of the queue alongside the possibility of a book with Neil Richardson, *Sustaining Preachers and Preaching*. One other thing has

6 This question is adapted from a point made by Richard Hoggart, *ibid.* p116

emerged in a similar way. That is about the Christian faith in the current context. Roughly speaking it can be described as “apologetics” and applied theology. (See the Appendix) As that is part of my preaching ministry I do not see that to be a competitor to the autobiography. To answer the question, therefore, other alternatives have to be identified. The way of doing that is a quite different process from the one I have just described. It involves looking beyond myself as well as inside myself for possibilities. My attempts to do that sincerely without simply putting up Aunt Sallies have not been very convincing. Somewhat vaguely three ideas emerged: more face to face work with people; further promotion of church and community development and consultancy work; developing new interests and acquiring new skills. They all seem desirable things to do, but in all honesty they do not rouse any enthusiasm in me nor do they attract or generate the energy to pursue them further. I think I am doing enough of the first; I feel my innovative and proactive career in the second has come to a natural end; the third is not necessarily excluded by pursuing the project.

Is this piece a rationale for proceeding with my vocational reminiscences? Should I now try to complete the stream of writing work that I started in 1992! I am not as sure as I was earlier in the process. Drafting it has been a good and a telling experience of the reflective writing described earlier. It has enabled me to think more deeply, to see the issues more clearly and, I believe, to avoid the danger of rationalizing my inner promptings enforced by others whose opinions I respect. Writing and rewriting, however, has also reminded me forcibly just how demanding the process is and the amount energy it consumes. In fact it is reflecting on the experience of writing this piece rather than the development of the argument, which seemed to have taken me to an affirmative conclusion, that is making me reconsider the wisdom of my undertaking the project and what life would be like without my involvement in it. Is this the kind of writing I need and can sustain? The jury is still out whilst all this works its way through my system! ⁷

On the 26th of September 2008 I came across this sentence I had drafted about this project:

An urge to complement my academic studies of my ministerial work with a reflective study of the vocational issues I have experienced is driving me to write these biographical notes.⁸

7 Going over some papers on 26.9.08 I noted that on 6.12.01 I asked myself whether writing of vocational biography was, ‘self indulgent. Could I be doing something more active?’

8 11.6.14 At times I have felt that writing these notes has been narcissistic. The feeling that I was taking myself too seriously made me feel somewhat ashamed

See [Part 1 Appendix](#) for further reflections.

if not guilty. There may be some truth in that. The other day I came across the following quotation from the introduction to a book William Rogers wrote, *The Politics Of Change* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1982) page 1.

The book is an exercise in self discipline rather than self-indulgence. It is an attempt to look at where I stand and the direction in which I should be pointing.

Increasingly, especially during the writing of Parts 9.4 and 5 on *Avec* and part 9.6 it has become an exercise of self-discipline, correction and repositioning my perspectives on past events and how I should regard and relate to them in the future and read off their implications for what remains of my vocational life.

