

A theology of ringing?

At the 'PR Matters' day (25 Feb 2017), during discussion of communication with non-ringers Maureen Frost voiced the need for a 'theology of ringing'. I had previously encountered the concept – I am not a theologian – but I care about the relationship between the church and ringing, so this note is an attempt to make a contribution by exploring the idea. I discussed this with David Grimwood in Edinburgh and he encouraged me to think it worth pursuing.

First I tried to orient myself by looking at:

- Parallels – theological interpretations of other fields of artistic expression or endeavour

Then, since a healthy relationship requires mutual understanding and knowledge, and suspecting that many clergy have relatively limited knowledge of ringing, I thought a first step should be to expose 'what ringing is' – not from a technical perspective (thought that would be easy to add if needed) but more broadly:

- The historical context – how ringing came into being and evolved to its present state
- The current context – ringing in the modern era and how it relates to the church

With this background I looked at the role of ringing in the modern church, in terms of the practical:

- The church's presence
- The church's outreach to the wider community
- Enrichment of the life of the church community

... and the theological:

- Worship
- Spirituality

Finally I looked at some related practical issues:

- Quality, Public v private, How to ring, When to ring, Integration

The result is more than 'a theology of ringing' because it is set in a wider context. In fact the theological content is smaller than I originally envisaged but I am sure it could be expanded by those more knowledgeable than I am.

Parallel theological interpretations

I looked for other examples of 'a theology of' subjects that were practised in both a religious and secular context. The most prominent that I found was Martin Luther talking about the theology of music. His focus seemed to be on music as a powerful gift from God, and something that he believed could help believers to give joyful expression to their beliefs. I assume that the expression of joy would extend to the listeners as well as the performers, since ringing touches far more listeners than performers.

On the web I found references to the theology of music, of art and of architecture. None of the authors had the prominence of Luther, and the articles were mainly written by individual Christians expressing their thoughts – some read like mini sermons.

The common themes I found were the idea that God created things of beauty and that people can come closer to God through appreciating beautiful things. This perspective seems a good way to approach a theology of bellringing.

Prompted by links in a diocesan newsletter to 'The spirituality of stained glass' and 'The spirituality of photography' I search for examples of 'spirituality' (of various arts), using the prefix 'Christian' to avoid being swamped by other forms of spirituality, which seem to be quite numerous.

One page (on spirituality of stained glass) included the quotation;

'Art is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses, then, from the spiritual insight gained through the senses and the stirring of emotions, to raise the human world to God, to His inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty and life.'¹

This concurs with the idea of approaching God through the senses and emotions, mediated by art. In the case of ringing it would be through hearing and responding to the flowing patterns and cadences, and to the intrinsic richness of the sound of the bells.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on the Liturgy, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture and Worship*, Art 42.

Historical context

As a precursor to describing the current relationship between the church and ringing it is helpful to be aware of the historical context, including the centuries before the Church proactively engaged with the art of ringing.

The sound of bells seems to be deeply engrained in the human spirit across many cultures, Christian and non-Christian. In much of the English speaking world ‘the joyous sound of bells’ is almost synonymous with the sound of changeringing, while other traditions are strongly embedded elsewhere, including different styles of full circle ringing² in Spain, around Bologna and Verona, the animated sound of Russian Orthodox bell music, and the melodic sound of carillons in the Low Countries.

Origins (16th – 19th centuries)

English style bellringing, and particularly change ringing, evolved over 400 years ago as a combination of public entertainment and sport. It developed in succeeding centuries as an entirely secular activity with ringers and ringing organised quite separately from the church. That separation, along with the community’s deep affection for their bells, almost certainly helped ringing as we know it to survive the Puritan era. Ringing thrived in the more relaxed times following the Restoration, and continued to develop, and spread more widely across the country.

Engagement (late 19th century)

The church began to engage with ringing in the mid to late 19th century. The Oxford Movement had brought major changes to the church, with the music performed within the church reformed and re-organised. But the performers in the tower were still isolated from the church and its mission.

A group of clergy who had learnt to ring while they were at Oxford or Cambridge decided to draw ringers into the church and recognise them as church workers. As part of this process, known as Belfry Reform, they instituted other changes that laid the foundations for the infrastructure of modern ringing:

- Ringing³ for services – Previously the call to worship had been limited to chiming⁴ a single bell (or maybe a few bells). Ringing before was widespread but for non-religious purposes and unconnected with services.
- Ringing societies – Previously there had been elite societies in London and a few regional centres. The clergy formed a network of diocesan and county ringing societies, and encouraged all ringers to join them.
- Change ringing – Previously change ringing was limited to a minority, with the mass of ordinary ringers merely ringing rounds⁵. The clergy promoted change ringing, which engages the mind as well as the hands and requires greater intellectual discipline, and which creates a more dynamic and uplifting musical sound.

The legacy of Belfry Reform was a more cohesive ringing community, closely integrated with the church, and with change ringing more firmly embedded in the culture of ringers. Ringing was still a secular art but it was directly engaged in the work of the church, and the majority of regular performances were associated with church services.

Adaptation (20th century)

Several factors influenced ringing during the 20th century, notably changes in society and the decline of church going, particularly in the latter half of the century. Together with increased mobility and the growth of opportunities for other leisure activities this made it increasingly difficult to recruit ringers from within the church. So to remain viable ringing bands increasingly recruited from the wider population as well as from the congregation.

The art of change ringing continued to advance, for example the number of peals⁶ rung each year has risen steadily since the 1880s (apart from dips during the two wars) – no doubt thanks to the clergy’s promotion of change ringing. In 1905 Reverend F E Robinson (who played a key role in Belfry Reform) became the first person to ring a thousand peals, but over 500 ringers have done that since and many have rung far more.

At first the clergy were heavily involved running the ringing societies that they helped to create, but from the 1920s onward they progressively disengaged. For example clergymen made up 20% of the Central Council of Church Bell Ringers from its foundation in 1891 until after the First World War, but their numbers declined sharply afterwards and now stand at around 1%. However, many clergymen are active ringers. The Guild of Clerical Ringers, which was founded in 1937, had around 40 members in its early years and grew to nearly 90 by the end of the century.

² In English style ringing bells swing through 360 degrees, mouth up to mouth up, with the rope winding around a wheel fixed to the bell.

³ Ringing – Bells swinging through 360°, mouth up to mouth up, and sounding in ordered sequences – a skilled activity.

⁴ Chiming – A bell(s) sounded by swinging it through a small angle so the clapper bounces off one side – an unskilled activity.

⁵ A fixed sequence, down the scale.

⁶ The ‘gold standard’ ringing performance, typically around 3 hours of continuous ringing.

Modern ringing

The art of ringing is vibrant, with the performance of leading bands surpassing the achievements of a few generations ago. Ringing for services is still the dominant form of performance, most rings⁷ of bells are in churches and most ringers are associated with one or more church. Secular ringing is also thriving, mainly in church towers. Ringing and the Church have a largely symbiotic relationship.

Reasons for ringing

In broad terms, ringing can be divided into four categories:

- Sacred performance – ringing for Sunday and other services (typically between half an hour and an hour)
- Secular performance – ringing to mark national events (eg Olympics, Jubilee) or community events
- Recreational – ringing for pleasure (eg ringing outings, peals, quarter peals or date touches)
- Training – initial teaching, skill development, team building and striking competitions

These categories could equally be applied to other activities such as choral singing or organ playing.

There is some overlap between categories. For example:

- Wedding ringing is part of the wedding service but the wedding itself is a largely secular event and the ringing usually accompanies the photography, chatting and confetti, not the prayers and blessing⁸.
- Quarter peals are often rung for services, especially at church festivals.
- Ringers can derive pleasure from service ringing
- Visiting ringers with no connection to a church or its services may join in and help with service ringing

Ringling bands

Most bands of ringers are associated with a church⁹. They are responsible to the clergy and PCC but typically operate autonomously for most day to day activity. All bands have a leader (tower captain) though active bands may have additional officers such as: ringing master (runs the ringing), steeple keeper (looks after the hardware), secretary (correspondence & admin), treasurer (finance). Typically officers are elected at AGM (chaired by clergy or warden).

To sustain regular ringing a band needs more ringers than bells¹⁰ – two ringers per bell will generally cover holidays, sickness, work and family commitments. It takes a considerable time to reach full competence so a healthy band will routinely train new ringers and have at least one competent ringing teacher¹¹.

Typical bands include ringers who are committed Christians (for whom ringing is an act of worship) and non-Christians (happy to ring for the Church in return for the pleasure of ringing) as well as many between these extremes. Most ringers see themselves as a part, albeit a semi-detached part, of the wider parish community.

The ringing community¹²

Beyond the home tower ringers enjoy a strong sense of community, and regularly help out with ringing at other towers, for example to ensure full bands to ring for weddings, an special performances routinely include ringers from multiple towers. There is also a tradition of universal welcome – any ringer visiting almost any tower worldwide will be invited to join in and ring. Changeringing on handbells¹³ is quite widespread¹⁴ though mainly done in private, and it too tends to transcend tower boundaries.

The demographic of the ringing community has undergone significant change in recent decades with a shift towards older ages caused by several factors. More ringers are remaining fit and active into old age, and more people are learning to ring in later life, for example with early retirement. Meanwhile more ringers who learn in their teens give up in early adulthood, possibly under career and family pressures. Overall numbers have remained similar but the long term implications of this shift – on both numbers and skill level – are not yet clear. For example many people who give up ringing later return, but will this balance the loss when the post war bulge gives up ringing?

⁷ A ring = a set of bells hung for English style ringing.

⁸ In some churches it is customary to ring before the wedding service as well as after, but after is much more common.

⁹ Or more than one church in some cases, notably in joint benefices.

¹⁰ When ringing, each bell is rung by a separate ringer.

¹¹ Not all bands manage this, with a resultant risk to long term viability.

¹² Often known as 'The Exercise', a term originating in the 18th century when young gentry took up ringing for the exercise it gave.

¹³ Each ringer rings two handbells – one in each hand – unlike tower bells where each ringer normally only rings one bell.

¹⁴ Around 20% of the peals rung each year are rung 'in hand'.

The role of ringing in the modern church

How does the art and practice of ringing contribute to the church and its mission in the 21st century?

It helps towards five objectives – some practical and some theological:

- Presence – Reminding an increasingly secular world that the church is alive in its midst
- Outreach – Providing links with the community and a route into the church
- Enrichment – Providing opportunities for fellowship in a shared skill within the church
- Worship – Playing a direct part in the activity of worship
- Spirituality – Touching the soul

Presence

Bells are the external voice of the church – they can remind those who hear them of the church's presence. The bells can be heard by anyone outside the church, whereas only those who have already decided to enter can see, hear and be influenced by what goes on inside the church.

Canon law requires all churches to chime at least one bell before a service, which is commonly done for less than a minute. In contrast with that somewhat limited voice, a church that has a ring of bells – the loudest of all musical instruments – and ringers to ring them, can project a richer and more sustained voice to the surrounding community.

In England, and locally in some other parts of the English speaking world, the sound of English style ringing has become inextricably linked with the church, and by default most of the public would associate ringing with something happening in the church, especially on a Sunday, despite the coexistence of secular ringing.

For the many who live or travel near the church but never come to a service, the sound of ringing reminds them of the church's continuing presence.

Outreach

The church has always looked outward to serve the wider community as well as looking inward to develop a deeper relationship between its believers and God. The modern church is no exception. My own church says it aims 'to be active and make a positive difference to you and our local community', and community features as one of its four priorities: Growth, Worship, Youth & Community.

A thriving group of ringers broadens the scope of activities the church can offer as a service to its local community.

People with no particular connection to the church, attracted by the skill, the challenge, the fellowship and/or the fascination of ringing will be drawn by it into closer contact with the church. At the least that contact is likely to result in a more positive view of the church, and for some it may lead them to participate more fully within the church.

Enrichment

A lively church is a busy church where a lot is happening. Some of that is 'doing things for others' but some is just 'doing things together'.

Ringing provides a distinct opportunity for members of a congregation to develop their skills as part of a team, to take pride in those skills and to share the responsibilities and mutual support that come with being part of a team.

Ringing adds to the mix of music, flower arranging and many other activities within the church.

Worship

Service ringing welcomes people as they come to worship. It helps with the transition between the bustle and noise of the journey and the ordered peacefulness of the service. It helps to set the tone for what is to come before entering the church, in the same way that organ music does after they have entered.

In former times the bells also 'called people to prayer' and in some places they still do, but in a world of double glazing and traffic noise, where many drive some distance rather than walking to church, it is more likely that they will only hear ringing shortly before they arrive.

For those who are lucky enough to be able to hear the ringing from home, its sound allows them to feel connected with the worship about to take place, even if they can't be present in person.

Spirituality

Christian spirituality is variously defined in terms of being open to the Holy Spirit and having one's life being

influenced by it. In a broader sense spirituality relates to the deepest values and meanings by which people live and includes an awareness beyond what is known and observable – a quest for sacred meaning or an inner dimension. Spirituality is thus partly about how one lives one's life and partly about the experiences that help to unlock the emotions and beliefs that will underpin it.

Art and endeavour in many forms can provide such experiences – not just by appreciating the beauty that can exist in a God created world but by tapping directly into the emotions.

English style ringing, and especially change ringing, has a unique sound – tapping into our musical sensibilities but yet unlike any other music. The continually varying cadences provide endless variety but the subtle relationship between successive cadences give an inherent coherence that the human mind can perceive even if it does not understand the underlying pattern. The resonance of each bell after it has struck merges with that of the other bells to provide a continuous rolling sound underlying the melody like the drone of a bagpipe.

Well executed ringing is a beautiful sound that can inspire the listener. The Director General responsible for BBC Music day in 2017 (in which ringing played an even bigger role than in previous years) said he was moved by 'the elemental wonder of the way in which the sound of ringing can open up souls'.

For the listener, ringing is an aural experience, but for the performers it is far more than that because it engages their kinaesthetic senses as well.

Ringing is a rhythmic, whole-body activity synchronised with the music. In some ways it is akin to the graceful experience of ballroom dancing, except that bells weigh far more than dance partners and guiding them in their continually weaving path requires great skill. Ringers can become one with their bells in much the same way that a rider does with a horse or motorbike. Top level, highly skilled ringing is a truly immersive experience.

For the Christian, employing such God given skills to create a beautiful sound can be a spiritual experience.

Some practical issues

The topics below do not have any agreed consensus, among ringers or among clergy, and practice varies from place to place. They are included because they affect the relationship between ringing and the church, and the relationship of the church with its community. So they could properly be considered by ringers and clergy. It will of course be for them to decide what is most appropriate in their particular context.

Quality

The ability of any performance to inspire and transport the soul depends in part on the quality of the performance. Like performers in other arts the capability of ringers can vary a lot, and the inherent difficulty of the task (swinging half a ton of metal with precision timing¹⁵) means it can vary rather more than it does in say choirs.

Any offering where the performers give their best is a service acceptable to God. But for mortals a performance's ability to touch their souls will depend at least in part on the beauty of the rendition. No one expects a village choir to match a cathedral choir but even the humblest village choir sings most of the right notes, mostly at the right time, and if they did not they would be given help and support to enable them to do so.

As noted above, ringing is an inherently difficult art to perform, and not all ringing achieves the standard set by a village choir. In a church where the band of ringers is struggling, the value of ringing to the church is likely to be more through presence, outreach, enrichment and its role in supporting worship than through the spiritual effect of its sound. Such situations can of course be opportunities for reinvigoration that will enhance the life of the church, but they can also be challenging.

Audibility

Tower bell ringing of all forms is invariably public, with the audience having little choice about whether to hear it. How far from the tower it is audible, and how loud it is near the tower, both vary from tower to tower.

A few towers are fitted with sound control shutters that can reduce the volume for practices etc, and be opened for services or other intentionally public ringing – but currently they are a tiny minority.

So as well as ringing performances being public, so too are most practices, including those for the most basic beginners. This differs from almost every other type of music where practising is done without an audience, and certainly without an audience that has no choice about whether to listen.

This raises several questions about the audibility of ringing:

¹⁵ Variation of more than a few hundredths of a second can be detected by the listener as irregular. Some ringing varies a lot more!

- Is it desirable for low quality practice ringing to be regularly inflicted on the public? Could it reduce public tolerance for ringing and the church in general? Or does the extra exposure benefit the church's presence?
- Is the amount of practising and training unduly constrained by what are considered acceptable duration and time of ringing?
- (Depending on the above) would some form of sound control for practices be desirable to permit more practices and/or practising later in the evening¹⁶?

How to ring

For sombre occasions like Remembrance it is customary to ring half muffled¹⁷. The alternation of loud and soft, bright and subdued, produces a unique sound. Even those who do not understand the symbolism of life and death can sense it as a dignified sound that means something special.

Funeral ringing was traditionally half muffled but where the funeral or memorial service is focused more on celebrating a life well lived than mourning a life lost, bereaved families may request unmuffled ringing.

In fact funeral ringing is relatively rare. If it could be offered more often would it enhance what the church offers to bereaved families?

When to ring

Most churches ring for a Sunday morning service¹⁸. This may be the only regular service or the most popular, and the custom has become the engrained norm¹⁹.

When a church holds special services at other times, do the bells also ring for them too? And should they?

- A church that holds a monthly Sunday afternoon baptism service may have a large attendance, many of whom are not be regular worshippers. Would it enhance the church's image to welcome them with ringing?
- Many churches hold midweek services for key days in the Christian calendar (Candlemas, Ash Wednesday, Ascension, etc). Would these have more impact (on the congregation and the surrounding community) if they were accompanied by ringing?

Good Friday is one of the most significant days in the Christian year, but ringing for Good Friday services is currently quite rare because of a common custom of no ringing in Holy Week. Such 'audible fasting' is consistent with the Lenten spirit (and it is rare for any ringing practices to be held during Holy Week) but extending the abstinence to service ringing has the disadvantage that it prevents the church from announcing highly significant services on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday²⁰. Would ringing help those who attend these services? Would half muffled ringing help the church to make the community more aware of Good Friday?

Integration

Although ringing is properly part of the service in the same way that pre-service organ music is, it is widely seen as being 'separate'. This perception is reinforced by the fact that the ringers are often out of sight, that quite a few of them do not attend the rest of the service²¹ and that ringing often ends several minutes before the main service starts (to give choristers and others time to get to their appointed places).

There are several ways in which ringing can be more closely integrated with the worshippers in church, which have occasionally been done:

- CCTV can relay video from cameras in the ringing room and bell chamber to let people see the ringing in progress. This could be on a screen in the porch or welcoming area, or if there is one it could be projected onto the screen at the front of the congregation.
- A piece of ringing can be an 'anthem' within the main service. In many churches this is only practical with handbells but could be done with tower bells that are audible²² and rung from a gallery or the crossing.

¹⁶ 9pm is generally considered the latest acceptable time for open ringing near dwellings but a later time would fit in better with the lives of working ringers, especially commuters, and is quite common in towers that have with variable sound control.

¹⁷ Each bell is fitted with a leather pad on one side of the clapper, which produces alternating loud and soft sequences of sound.

¹⁸ Some ring for an evening service but far fewer than once did.

¹⁹ Ringers often define their allegiance as 'where I ring on Sunday morning'.

²⁰ Good Friday ringing is always half muffled, befitting the solemnity of the occasion.

²¹ Some ringers may only attend one of the services for which they ring, or they may prefer to attend a service for which there is no ringing. Some may be committed to ring for another service at another church. Some may be non-Christians who give their service by ringing but do not attend worship.

²² Tower bells are designed for external audibility, and what is heard inside may be minimal.