

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO NOW?

THE BENEFITS OF LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO ONE PLACE

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As I enter my fiftieth year I am conscious that, God willing, I have just entered the second half of my ordained ministry. I was ordained at 29 in 1996 and have spent the whole time serving in one parish. I came as the curate for four years, served as associate rector for two and then since February 2003 I have been the rector of St George's Stamford in the Diocese of Lincoln. In June I will have been here for twenty years.

My late father was a vicar who spent 13 years in his first parish and then 23 in his second. My father's role model was John Stott who of course spent all his ministry at All Soul's Langham Place. I state this simply to paint a backdrop to the ministry environment that I grew up in.

As I look forward to the second half of my ministry, I can look back on some of the benefits of having stayed in the same place for 20 years. Here are seven benefits of long-term ministry in one place that immediately come to mind. The first benefit was simply providential.

1. CONTINUITY FOR THE CHURCH

The step up from associate rector to rector came from being in the right place at the right time. St George's benefited from the oversight of the then Bishop of Grantham who was prepared to pursue the unorthodox practice of appointing from within the same parish. I am pretty sure that I would not have been given the chance to be interviewed if I had been applying for St George's from outside. I was only 36 and inexperienced as a leader. Both the church and the Bishop were

prepared to take a risk and I am thankful. This of course gave the church a sense of continuity as I shared the recent history and experience of growth that had come under the previous incumbent. We never set out to have a succession plan, but that is what in effect actually happened!

2. GROWING AS A LEADER

I have made loads of mistakes along the way. The hardest thing for me to learn was leading and managing a staff team. There were some painful moments, particularly in the early years. I am thankful for wise and good leaders across the church who helped coach and advise on creating structures and processes that shared the load and responsibilities of leadership. The benefit of staying for a long time, is that we have been able to build a momentum in the development of the staff team. The pain of the early years and even more recently, has helped to shape a healthy staff team that fits the shape of the church today. I am sure I could have taken these lessons to a



new situation, but I would have been in the position of having to start again. When you stay in a place you can get on a roll and therefore go further and deeper.

3. WIDER INFLUENCE

The longer one is in a place, the more connections naturally arise and the more doors open for partnerships in wider local ministry. I have also been licensed in the neighbouring Diocese of Peterborough, originally to help with a turnaround team in a neighbouring village. This eventually led to one of my colleagues taking on that particular village group when it became vacant.

In 2010 the diocese asked me to become the priest-in-charge of a neighbouring parish in Stamford, with the long-term aim of getting the church ready to stand on its own two feet again with a new incumbent. In 2015, I handed the parish back to a new incumbent and was able to have an influence on the appointment. I now have a mentoring relationship with the new vicar.

We have sent on average one person into ordained ministry every year. This means we have a long-term drip-feed influence on the wider diocese. I am able to flag up strategic vacancies to people whom I know will be able to make a difference. The same principle stands for the curates that I am asked to train.

We are currently talking with the diocese about the possibility of creating a Bishop's Mission Order post to work out of St George's with freedom to work across a large part of South Lincolnshire. Personally, I think resource churches in market towns are the answer to renewing wider ministry in our rural counties.

4. DEEPER IMPACT

One part of seeing connections in a place, is seeing what is missing. St George's has always had a saying that 'people matter.' Sometimes that can be a noose to hang yourself with, particular when we are failing to care. Over the years we have

seen a deepening of care for the wider community. Many of the volunteers for the local Christian charities that have sprung up in recent years have come out of St George's, though ministry is shared across all the churches. We have benefited from seeing some of the national movements owned locally, such as Street Pastors and Foodbank. St George's runs a CAP debt centre. There is a wonderful Christian charity that serves the needs of the elderly called Evergreen. We have a pregnancy advice centre in town that was originally linked into Care Confidential. The latest project is around mental health. A local GP in our congregation has taken on the mental health baton for the region and is basing all the local community discussion in the church building and pulling in national and regional experts.



I am sure many of these initiatives would have sprung up in any case. The benefit of a long-term ministry in a larger church context is that there is the ability to co-ordinate and plan and keep things in balance so that the overall impact goes further. Long-term ministry simply brings stability.

5. FREEDOM TO PURSUE OUTSIDE ROLE INTERESTS

I have a long-term connection with Uganda ever since spending a year teaching in a Church of Uganda theological college in the year prior to ordination. St George's has long had connections with Uganda through CMS links. I have been encouraged and released to develop our ongoing links with Uganda, particular with the Diocese of Karamoja where we have supported our long-term friend and former student in church planting, relief work, building projects and diocesan conferences. I have been on average about once a year, taken mission teams with me and seen the growth of the gospel in a very different place. St George's has always been a strong supporter of overseas work and it has been refreshing for me to have the freedom to be released, sometimes up to four weeks in a year to pursue something which gives me energy. I have been able to grow into this, it fits, and no doubt the Karamoja connection would have to be negotiated or even take a back seat in a new context.

More recently I have been elected to General Synod. I know I can leave St George's in the capable hands of a great home team when I am away from the parish.

6. STABILITY FOR THE FAMILY

Our children were all born in Stamford, starting in year one of the curacy. They have had the benefit of growing up with friends and we have had the privilege of belonging to long-term friendship groups formed through the birth of children, both in and outside the church. Apart from the transition from primary to secondary school, there has been no major upheaval to their education. The youngest still has three and a half years to go and it is good to know that what has been



working well for us as a family can continue. We never started out with the intention of staying all this time. We have considered one move in particular which would have been a complete upheaval, but this long-term stability for the family has been a blessing.

7. THE ORIGINAL VISION

Twenty years has flown past. When I stood up in 2003 as the new Rector and declared that now was the time to go up into the hills and bring down the wood to build God's house in Haggai-like fashion, my father described it as a young man's vision. Given my time again, I would be more realistic about what was actually possible given my lack of experience.

I have just preached on Haggai again and can see that the original young man's vision has really shaped the last 13 years of ministry at St George's. I can see how the Lord has joined up the dots and made good of things that have started and stopped. We are still about 'building God's house' and it might just be the case that with the benefit of experience and long-term ministry in one place, we may be about to go further, wider and deeper than we have ever gone before!



FOR REFLECTION

1. Should succession planning play a greater part in diocesan strategy for growing churches?
2. How does moving on too soon possibly stunt the growth of church leaders?
3. Looking at your own ministry what benefits can you observe from simply having been in a place for some time? What benefits can you see opening up in the future?
4. What might be the signs that a church leader has overstayed?
5. How do we avoid ministry being dictated by personal comfort?