

A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION

A REFLECTION

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In my first Lead On article I discussed some of the benefits of a long-term ministry in the same place. I have been at St George's Stamford for the last twenty years and been the rector since 2003. Staying has not always been easy and from time to time we have had thoughts about leaving.

The question that I want to reflect on in this article is why, in the face of the inevitable challenges and frustrations, we have decided to stay rather than move on to pastures new. My reflections do not mean that I plan to be here for the next twenty years. Above all I want to be open to God's call on my life. God's call is where I want to start.

1. REMEMBER YOUR CALLING

I was in my final year at theological college and had to find a curacy 18 months in advance. Philippa and I were about to go and teach for one year in a Church of Uganda theological college as a gap year prior to ordination. Given that this was not the normal way of doing things in the Church of England, we were going to be hard pushed to find both a church and a diocese that knew what they were doing 18 months in advance in regard to future curacies.



I found myself praying for guidance in my college study, when clear as a bell I heard the name of my future incumbent, whom I knew as one of my leaders when I was a teenager on CYFA camps (now CPAS Ventures).

The word was so clear I immediately wrote a letter to the said incumbent stating that I knew he didn't have a curate at present, but if he were able to consider having one in 1996 would he please consider me.

Amazingly I received a letter by return of post saying thank you for my letter, the Bishop of Lincoln had just given permission the day before for a curacy in 1996! To cut a long story short we ended up coming to St George's in June 1996 after a year in Uganda knowing that God had clearly called us to both the year in Uganda and to St George's Stamford. St George's and Uganda have been twin tracks in my calling since 1995.

On one occasion in 2010 when I was thinking myself into a job on the other side of the world, a retired vicar who had been praying for me told me that in prayer he had seen a removal lorry outside the Rectory, but for

some reason it was empty, did it mean anything to me? After going through that process of discernment regarding that particular move, it was clear that I was thinking myself into a new situation, hence the removal van, but now was not the time to go, hence the empty van.

I was clearly called to Stamford over 20 years ago and quite simply I have not been called away. I know the Lord can speak about these matters and when the time is right his call will be clear.

2. THE GRASS IS NOT GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

In 2010 I took a sabbatical which coincided with the seven-year itch. St George's had just committed to a local partnership with a neighbouring parish which was going to take some thinking through as we had a lot of balls in the air. Once out of the parish, the natural day-to-day focus on Stamford slipped into the background as it was supposed to do. What I wasn't expecting was the email asking me to consider applying to be the vicar of a significantly larger Anglican church. I looked at the profile, I prayed, I imagined myself into the new job and I started what I now know to be the inevitable physical and mental reactions that come from stimulating escapist delusions of grandeur.

When these distractions come and one is not on sabbatical, they completely take over your focus, energy and commitment to where God has called you to be. My own experience is of sleepless nights, researching the new place, working out what I would do in the new situation. The danger is that we view these manifestations as a sense of call, when in reality they are distractions to the real calling on one's life. It is amazing how many times an attractive job comes onto the radar just as a new initiative is taking birth or opening up in Stamford.

I have concluded that Satan knows my weakness and when to push the buttons to distract me from focusing on the work to hand. Having recognised this repeating pattern I am aware of what will happen if I take a look with any kind of serious intent. I have learnt to recognise the physical manifestations as a clue to saying no to further pursuit of any particular job. When I say no, everything goes back to normal.

There is of course a difference to being asked to seriously consider something and having wandering eyes which lead to a temporary infatuation. The grass is not greener on the other side. When our head is turned, we need to keep our head on. I have learnt to say 'No!' When the time to move is right, the Lord will make it clear above my own particular desires and preferences, though I am sure he will use them in whatever the new calling might be.

3. RECOGNISE WHAT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR

When ministry is growing and a church gets to a certain size there are a number of growth inhibitors. One of the perceived obstacles in the Anglican set up is the parish boundary. Over the years St George's has grown within the confines of our own small parish. In one sense we are at the natural capacity of our grade 1 listed building on any given Sunday.

When a leader has a vision for what could be in the wider area, it can sometimes be frustrating to find that others in the wider Church do not share the same vision or have the same priorities. Whilst admitting to ongoing frustrations, one of the ways of working around this is to recognise what I am actually responsible for and how I can engage positively with those who hold different responsibilities. This has led to a number of local partnerships which has added to the greater good of the wider Church as well as church growth in the wider area.

I have found that by engaging with local bishops and archdeacons we have been able to collaborate in mutually beneficial ways. We have resourced more than one local village, we have helped a local church turn around and move towards being self-sustaining again and we are now engaged in a BMO process with the diocese for South Lincolnshire. When I get to the edge of my responsibilities, I have to engage with those who have different responsibilities if I want things to progress. If a leader is not prepared to do this and no more growth is possible, it is probably time to move on.

I have resisted a larger church building for a long time, but I am just starting to consider whether alongside local partnerships, I need to take responsibility for a new initiative in this regard. It is after all my responsibility.

4. THE LARGER CHURCH MERRY GO ROUND

When I have been tempted to think outside of St George's in terms of future ministry, I have become increasingly aware of the larger church merry go round. I have read job descriptions and thought, yes I have the experience to take on that responsibility, but do I want to do the same thing in another place, when I have done all the hard work to get to that position at St George's and team is working so well here.

If I leave St George's, St Georges' is then in the same position of having to find someone whom they hope will have the right leadership gifts and experience to come in and take the ministry on here. I may actually contribute more to the growth of God's kingdom by staying where I am and already have



momentum, rather than transferring to another larger church, where time is needed to understand the context and grow the team. Of course somebody has to do that, but we probably need to be developing the up and coming generation to take on these roles alongside the recruitment of those with experience.

So often growth and a healthy church is down to a great leadership team. I am conscious that I would like to take my team with me if I ever moved and I am not sure St George's would thank me for that! Seriously, the local team dynamic is important and leaders of larger churches working well in one context might not find similar fruitfulness in another place. I am open to God's call when it comes, but if a move is fuelled by personal ambition rather than God's call, there will be frustrations ahead.



5. PATIENCE WHILST WORKING TOWARDS THE BIG PICTURE

Looking back over twenty years I can see the times that I have thought of moving on coinciding with natural events like the end of a curacy, the moving of my incumbent, the sabbatical break and perhaps my children finishing school in a few years' time. If the Lord does not call me away, I can still see future gains for his kingdom and big picture vision that will take up the next twenty years. Recent events in my own story include the possibility of wider influence whilst remaining where I am and this excites me. I would like to share what I have learnt with others, but I also want to continue learning and growing in the place that God has planted me. So when I am frustrated, I remind myself of the big picture and that, God willing, there is plenty of time for the Lord to bring about what he wants to achieve in and through his people in Stamford and the surrounding area.



FOR REFLECTION

1. What can you give thanks for in your current position?
2. What distracts you from your current responsibilities in an unhelpful way?
3. Who do you talk with about possible opportunities?