

FOCAL MINISTRY

Managing Decline or Organising for Growth?

BY IAN PARKINSON

As the events of the first Christian Pentecost unfolded before their bewildered gaze, and as a group of apparently drunk men and women spilled onto the streets of Jerusalem, the apostle Peter drew the attention of the large crowd of onlookers to words spoken many centuries before (Joel 2:28-32). What they were witnessing, he suggested, was nothing less than the turning of the ages, the arrival of the long awaited end times. In this era, he explained, things would be different.

One of the most significant differences, according to Peter's text from the prophet Joel, was that from now on the Spirit would be given not simply to special people for particular tasks, but would be poured out upon every believer. Even those groups which had been overlooked (such as women, young people and slaves) would now be right at the very heart of God's purposes.

Those tasks and prerogatives which had been reserved to the few (the prophets, priests and kings), such as hearing and speaking God's word, would now be the responsibility of all. Whereas in the former, old covenant times, the work of God had been the province of specially

anointed individuals, now, in this new era, it would be entrusted to an anointed community.

Whilst evident from the New Testament that, within the church, particular people carried particular responsibilities for the exercise of leadership or oversight (we will explore this role more fully in a subsequent Lead On article), such roles appear to be focussed on the work of equipping the whole people of God to share in the whole mission of God (Ephesians 4:11-16). In the new covenant church, 'everyone gets to play'.

THE GROWTH OF CLERICALISM

From the early years of the second Christian century onwards, often

provoked by a concern to safeguard purity of doctrine or of church order, responsibility for teaching and ministry gradually migrated to the hands of ordained leaders.

By the modern era, the Church of England had largely drifted back into an old covenant paradigm under which the clergy were largely responsible for everything. Despite the impact of renewal movements (e.g. Methodism) and despite the prophetic voices of luminaries (e.g. Roland Allen), the Church of England was in thrall to clericalism with the consequent shrivelling of the New Testament ideal of the ministry of all God's people.



There is a widespread perception that our ministry as a church cannot continue without sufficient ordained clergy to perform the tasks of ministry. Given the decreasing capacity of most dioceses to fund the number of clergy at previous levels, this residual conviction is leading to the panic currently experienced in so many quarters. It is this same conviction which results in suspicion of any initiative which does not have at its heart the recruitment and resourcing of more clergy as the solution to our current problems.

BACK TO BASICS

The experience of the church in China in the mid twentieth century, or the Anglican church in Madagascar in the 19th century, suggests that shorn of clerical leadership but energised by the Spirit of God, the Church of Jesus Christ can flourish and grow when ministry and leadership is more widely dispersed. At its best, Focal Ministry is such an initiative.

Although now finding expression in more urban and suburban contexts, such as in my own Diocese of Sheffield, most of the earliest Focal Ministry (FM) initiatives emerged in rural or semi-rural contexts. Although almost always conceived reactively as a response to dwindling clergy numbers, their resonance with some of the theological principles

outlined earlier have led in many cases to very significant fruitfulness.

The description of such ministry reflects the truth that every local congregation needs a person or, ideally, a small team, to act as the focal point for mission and ministry both within the congregation itself and for the sake of the community which it serves. A vicar of a multi-parish benefice cannot hope to fulfil such a role in the six, eight, ten or more parishes she serves and will feel increasingly thinly spread to the point of ineffectiveness and burnout. However, if that vicar is able to grow focal leadership in every congregation and focus herself on resourcing and overseeing such leadership, then each congregation is far more likely both to flourish and grow.

Time and again, in interviewing focal ministers from such contexts, in the course of undertaking research into Focal Ministry, I heard a similar story repeated. A Reader, another licensed lay minister, or a trusted lay person with no formal ministry accreditation, in a dwindling church congregation with a passing relationship with its struggling incumbent, was asked to take on the role of Focal Minister.

Rather than simply see themselves as a surrogate for the vicar, doing

their best to do as many of the tasks she would have done had she more time, their role was conceived as one of galvanising the local congregation around tasks of mission and ministry, enabling others to grow into new areas of responsibility.

Most took on some responsibilities in leading worship, though by no means all took responsibility for preaching. Almost without exception, the churches under their leadership began to grow, not only numerically, but also in the scope of ministry they were able to undertake and in the numbers of new leaders they began to develop and form.

One of the most heart-warming stories I came across was that of an early retired self-supporting ordained minister who agreed to take on oversight of four semi-rural churches. Having established focal leadership in each one, over the course of the next few years, four more churches were added to the group and three further Fresh expression congregations were launched across the benefice. Focal leadership was put in place in each congregation and by the time this Oversight Minister moved on after twelve years in post he had in turn raised up and developed his successor, herself now an SSM.

Although my own research did not extend to measuring such growth in any formal way, Bob Jackson's far more rigorous research into numerical growth of churches under Focal Leadership can be found in *Leading One Church at a Time*, Bob Jackson (Grove).

CHALLENGES AHEAD

In my own role as a coach of clergy transitioning to roles as Oversight Ministers of Focal teams I regularly hear concerns voiced around how such teams might be recruited and formed. Some church leaders, especially in more challenging social contexts, recognise that many of their people struggle with low self-



esteem, with lack of self confidence and are fearful of taking on responsibility.

Others in more suburban contexts remind me that their people are all too often time poor, already juggling a plethora of responsibilities at work, in their families and in the local church. Some congregations are frankly so elderly that almost no-one any longer has the energy or capacity to take on responsibility.

We do need to hold fast to the conviction, to paraphrase Archbishop Rowan Williams, that 'God gives to the Church everything the Church needs to be the Church and to do the things the Church is called to do.'

The things which his Spirit is bringing to birth in the lives of his people may not always be immediately obvious, but we do need to work hard to unearth them and enable them to flourish. In our own diocese we are also encouraging stronger churches to consider giving away small 'grafts' to churches which might find it difficult to resource their own leadership. Such grafts, made up of small groups of capable and willing people with leadership capability, are able to bring fresh energy and vitality to the receiving churches.

One such graft, which went under the leadership of an SSM six years ago to a congregation of thirty or so older people, has seen the host church grow to well over one hundred and fifty people and to a place of growing influence within its community. This church in turn is now about to send a team of twenty, under the leadership of a Focal Minister, as a graft to another neighbouring church.

It has often been the case, throughout the history of the Christian Church, that it has taken the experience of challenge and adversity, of loss and threat, to cause us to embark upon a path which we would not otherwise have chosen and yet which may well represent

God's best for us. The threat of an over-reliance on the ordained to perform the work of ministry for us will not vanish overnight. However, my own conviction is that our current resource crisis is serving to remind us of some of our core DNA as the Church of Jesus Christ and to revive afresh a concern for the engagement of all God's people in the work of mission and ministry.