

LEADING OR SURVIVING IN A MULTI-CHURCH SITUATION?

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'As each parish wants more of you (and doesn't see what you do elsewhere, or think about it much), you can feel that you are a disappointment to them, and that they don't appreciate all you do ...'

So said one incumbent from a multi-parish benefice (MPB), outlining just one of the challenges of working in such situations.

Across the Church of England (and in many other denominations), increasing numbers of incumbents, SSMS and Readers are being asked to cope with leading more than one church. And it's not just in rural areas, as may originally be thought, but across

suburban and urban areas too. Sometimes, a group is two churches, which has unique challenges of its own, but often several more and, occasionally, many.

However, for many church leaders, lay and ordained, leading in the context of two or more churches is new ground, even though it is a pattern that has existed and spread for twenty to thirty years now. So, my first questions for those in some sort of multi-church situation are about how things are going.

HOW ARE THINGS GOING?

Is it all about rotas and quotas and keeping the show on the road? Is it about ensuring the baptisms, marriages and funerals are done, the sick are visited and the services on Sundays are being well led? Is it about good PCCs, however many of them there are, and competent care of multiple and possibly ancient buildings? Is that enough? Surely that's enough – for it is a demanding and exhausting task to achieve all those things: not to mention the possibility of multiple APCMs, faculties and churchyards, and maybe relationships with other denominations to work on? Then there are village events where you have to show your face – in several villages – and trying to keep disparate groups happy. Don't even think about what might ensue if you suggest any far-reaching changes or remove the pews.

One vicar described the challenges and joys like this:

'It can be a source of frustration that, because I have to spread myself across the parishes, I don't



have time to devote to one of the parishes if I feel it would benefit from more attention, either to build it up or move it forward. There is also the mental effort to hold distinct parishes and their problems and events in your mind.

‘However there is also a joy at being able to work in different ways in each of the parishes, and that (usually) they’re not all causing problems at the same time!’

Is that what it’s all about? Rushing around spinning plates, hoping nothing falls? Is that what God is asking of us as leaders? Or is there more to it than that? And if there is, however do we think and act differently?

HOW CAN WE THINK AND ACT DIFFERENTLY?

It’s a big challenge, because all the other things do need to be done. However, we do need somehow to find space for reflection and, maybe, innovation. Churches of all kinds, whether in multi-parishes or not, are having to find ways to respond creatively and well to a fast-changing culture to help people to engage with the gospel. Our challenge is not to preside over decline, but to help our churches to grow and flourish.

There is no one formula for helping churches in a multi-parish benefice to grow. In our work with lay people and clergy in these situations we find people tackling the challenges in different ways in different places.

Some, for example, concentrate on streamlining structures rather than duplicating activities in individual churches; others on encouraging prayer for the benefice, others prioritise creating cell groups or nurture groups or activities with children and young people. And this is as it should be. Our God is infinitely creative and loving, and does not produce identical Christians or churches.

However, in our work with both ordained and lay leaders in such situations, we are discovering some common threads in making things work.

1. **Remember that you are not alone.** When churches, leaders or individuals are struggling with the changes brought about by creating and maintaining multi-parish benefices, it helps to know that thousands of others around the country will be facing similar issues. There may be others locally who would value sharing ideas and experiences.
2. **Delegate.** It’s easy to think that you are indispensable or that others cannot do what you do. However, a significant part of being a good leader is seeing and developing gifts in others. If you are willing to do this more and more, all sorts of sharing of tasks can be done. For example, one group of churches I know has someone who deals with all the wedding requests, doing the initial meetings and administration, so that the vicar can concentrate on marriage preparation and the service. One incumbent put the issue of delegation very starkly, ‘The leader’s choice is “delegate or die”’. However, a real bonus can be that as we trust people more with sharing the load, creativity starts to bubble up.
3. **Give permission to experiment, and support failure and success.** As people start having creative ideas for new things, it’s great if you can make lots of space for them to experiment, giving encouragement and support but not taking over. Who knows what might happen as a result? And if it doesn’t work, help them to pick up and try something else.
4. **Last, but by no means least, PRAY.** As one vicar put it: ‘A top tip for a new leader in an MPB? Pray! It is God’s work and we need his wisdom and strength ...’ In one MPB we are working with, people have been encouraged to set alarms for midday to be reminded to pray daily for a few moments for the churches in their group. Simple, but effective. Or, as St Paul puts it: ‘Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.’ (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Work with leaders in multi-parish benefices is a current area of focus for CPAS. Working with Lead Academy and The Arthur Rank Centre, we are creating two-year learning communities in dioceses for groups of lay and ordained leaders in MPBs, to enable them to step back, reflect, learn, share ideas and plan for the future. So far, the pilots in two dioceses are showing encouraging results.



FOR REFLECTION

- Is there another local church leader, or group of leaders, you could meet with to pray and share ideas and challenges?
- Is there a discrete piece of administration or other ministry responsibility that you could delegate to someone else, to give you more space to pray, dream and innovate?
- How can you encourage people to be creative in trying new things to engage with their communities?
- Is there some new prayer initiative you can start to help people take responsibility for praying for the churches in your group?