

## MAKING SENSE OF THE COMPLEXITIES OF A MULTI-CHURCH SCENARIO

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It took me ages as a new, part-time NSM curate and pioneer minister to get my head around our set-up. I started work with a vicar of four churches but with three PCCs. Three of those churches worked closely with the Methodist church in their village, some in formal relationships, some informally. That involved the vicar working with two separate Methodist ministers from different circuits, though the employment parameters of those ministers seemed to change from year to year. In addition, our four churches were working closely with the four in the neighbouring group – together forming a larger group for some services. A further complication was that one from our four and one from the neighbouring four

churches had related together historically and still shared two services a month. Finally, the small youth group in one of our churches was linked with a youth project in a town in a completely different deanery. Are you still with me? It's complicated, isn't it. My job as a pioneer was to plant new initiatives and fresh expressions of church. All exciting and creative, but adding further layers of complexity.

Our situation is far from unique, and makes me wonder if there are ways we could simplify?

Just as people start feeling the need to clear out, chuck out and spring clean at this time of year, maybe we need to take a long, hard look at our patterns of ministry and administration across our groups of churches. Maybe we need to see which cupboards need turning out and which garages are so chock-full of old stuff that there's no room for anything new or creative? Can we, gently and firmly, begin to dream of new ways of organising ourselves to reduce repetition and the maybe heedless deployment of our precious resources of people, time, money and energy?

### FACING CHANGE

Of course, any sort of change in patterns of ministry and services, especially where they have been established for a very long time, is a challenge. So, dreaming of simplifying is not enough, we need to plan carefully how we can implement the necessary changes. And all of that may take time.



Let me then suggest two things that may help us on our journey.

### 1. INVOLVE PEOPLE

If we barge in with fully-formed plans for change without any consultation, we are likely to lose people's interest and goodwill very quickly. However, if we can present the start of a vision towards a more effective future and then engage people of all ages (including children) in praying and talking it all through, there is much more likelihood of coming up with a creative and workable plan for development and growth. Yes, of course PCCs need to play their part, but trying to find other ways of engaging people is important, such as questionnaires, after service meetings, vision days and shared meals.

### 2. TRAIN PEOPLE

Recent research seems to suggest that clergy just working longer and longer hours is not going to help our churches to grow and change – quite apart from the fact that it often leads to burnout. We therefore need to equip and train more and more people to take responsibility for leadership of various kinds in our churches.

That can sound alarming for clergy who are already fully engaged with keeping the show on the road. However, there are ways of starting things gently.

I know of one group of churches where everyone who was currently in leadership roles – churchwardens, small group leaders, Sunday school leaders, PCC members – was invited to a monthly meeting entitled 'Together in ministry'. The meeting was held in a different village or church hall each time and would start with a bring and share supper for the thirty or so people who came. After supper there would be a talk on some aspect of Christian leadership, or church life, and then discussion around the tables about how the talk was relevant to this group of six churches. Often visiting speakers were invited to bring new ideas and thoughts.

The results were that people started to get to know each other much more across the churches, and also began to develop a shared sense of the mission of God in their area. In addition, they grew in confidence in leading services, and, (with permission from the bishop), learning to preach simply from the Bible reading, or reading a meditation or sermon from a book. A few went on to explore licensed ministry.

Once people are used to meeting, talking and praying about faith and Christian leadership, it might be time to do a course like CPAS' own [Growing Leaders](#) course, which has helped so many people to discover God's call on their lives.

### BIBLE EXAMPLES

There are key points in the Bible when people are mobilised by God and his leaders to raise up new people to do things. Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, challenges Moses about his patterns of over-work and over-commitment and gives him a pattern of appointing leaders under him to deal with the issues among the people of Israel.

Then again, at the start of Acts 6, the disciples realise they need help to deal with a particular practical complaint about the sharing of food amongst the needy. They are wise enough to discern that they need to keep concentrating on God's word as their priority, so they need others to help them. However, they are also wise enough to discern that those who do the practical work of serving at tables still need to be people 'full of faith and of the Holy Spirit'.

Getting leadership patterns right is not a new issue for our 21st century multi-parish benefices but, as of old, getting them right can free situations up for growth.



### FOR REFLECTION

1. What things might we have to rearrange or cancel in order to put aside some time, perhaps a day or more of retreat to pray and dream dreams for the growth and development of our churches (whether they are thriving or struggling at the moment)? Are there others who would also pray and/or fast with us to ask for God's wisdom?
2. What issues might we face if we start the conversations around simplifying patterns of worship and administration across our churches? Who might we engage – either from those in our churches, or from the wider church – to enable those conversations to be both honest and creative?
3. What could we do to start, or develop, initiatives for helping people to grow in Christian faith and leadership?
4. What examples from the Bible inspire us as Christian leaders that we could study more closely as we seek wisdom from God for the way forward?