

OVERSIGHT MINISTRY

A Way Forward for the Church of England?

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OVERSIGHT MINISTRY: A WAY FORWARD FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND?

Helicopter parenting is a term coined in recent decades to describe a style of parenting which is over protective. Frequently displaying a high level of anxiety over the details of their children's lives, parents hover like helicopters over their children in an attempt to protect them from anything with the capacity to spoil their enjoyment of life.

Whether motivated by guilt at having to spend time away from the family due to work commitments, or a misplaced sense of responsibility, such an excessive concern to control the minutiae of the different aspects of a child's life can have profoundly negative consequences. Studies suggest that children of helicopter parents are often less independent, less equipped to make good personal choices, less resilient in the face of challenges, and are more likely to suffer from anxiety.

If helicopter parenting is a relatively recent phenomenon, *helicopter pastoring* in the local church may be a better established thing. It is certainly the case that all too many

congregations have become far too dependent, for far too long, upon the (almost exclusive) provision of ministry by ordained leaders.

Faced with a crisis in clergy numbers (in some Anglican Dioceses, including my own Diocese of Sheffield, the expectation is that we will very shortly have 50% fewer stipendiary clergy than 30 years ago), such congregations are now facing chronic anxiety and genuine bewilderment as they try and conceive ways in which their church might survive without its previous level of ministry provided by stipendiary, ordained people. Like inadequately parented children, they simply have not been prepared for spiritual adulthood and proper responsibility and have little resilience in the face of current challenges.

It is hardly surprising that when the topic of Focal Ministry (see *Lead On*, October 2021) is raised, with its focus on the growth of more dispersed lay leadership across local congregations, many congregations begin to express alarm. Some clergy find all this very unsettling. For a whole host of reasons, they have been comfortable and fulfilled in roles in which they seek to provide for the



pastoral and other spiritual needs of their dependent flocks.

If those flocks are truly to thrive and their members grow to maturity in Christ, discovering and exercising their gifts and callings, then clergy and other leaders have a vital role to play in seeing this accomplished. It's just that *Helicopter Pastoring* is never going to achieve this. What is required is a shift to a way of operating which has far more resonance with the way in which leadership is construed in the New Testament.

In the Diocese of Sheffield, we are asking stipendiary clergy to transition to a subtly new role which we have styled Oversight Ministry. Indeed, every clergyperson appointed to any post within the Diocese is now automatically appointed to such a role. Each Oversight Minister is likely to have oversight of two to three existing congregations, though a key part of their role will be to be proactive in encouraging the planting of new congregations (our aspiration is to plant 75 such congregations in the next four years, including one in each of our church schools). Drawing attention (as does the Anglican Ordinal) to the episcopal dimension of the ordained role, the distinctive responsibilities of an Oversight Minister can be summarised under four headings.

1. EQUIPPING THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD FOR THE WHOLE MISSION OF GOD

Rather than seeing their role as that of performing ministry tasks for the benefit of others, Oversight Ministers recognise that their primary calling is to equip all God's people for the work of mission and ministry. Understanding that God calls and empowers every one of his people to participate in his work, Oversight Ministers seek to work in partnership with him, to enable others to

discern their own unique calling, the particular spiritual gifts with which they have been entrusted, and to engage confidently in the work of God's kingdom. To this end they will be proactive in envisioning others for service, in creating opportunities for people to test and exercise their fledgling gifts, and in training and coaching others.

One of the particular ways in which they will help people to grow as missional disciples is by enabling people to live out every part of their lives as a response to God's call. The workplace, the sports team, the pub, the community group – in short, every place where people spend time – becomes an opportunity for missional service.

Oversight ministers begin to measure their fruitfulness, not in terms of how many people they have served or gathered, but rather in terms of how many people are genuinely being envisioned and released for mission.

2. GROWING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

Recognising that all God's people get to share in God's mission, the Oversight Minister equally recognises that some are also called to share in the work of leadership, taking responsibility for particular areas of ministry within the life of the local church. A significant amount of time and attention will be paid to developing and coaching these fledgling leaders as they take on new responsibilities. One of the best ways of enabling this to happen is by intentionally sharing leadership tasks with others and by enabling them to contribute in meaningful ways to the leadership of the church.

Effective Oversight Ministers are always looking for ways to do themselves out of a job, raising up others who might even outstrip us in their effectiveness in different areas of leadership.

3. SUPPORTING, RESOURCING AND OVERSEEING OTHER LEADERS

Many leaders have had the experience of being asked to take on new responsibility, but then left to get on with things without any further involvement, or even interest being shown, by the person who handed over the responsibility. Oversight Ministry is very different from the simple delegation of tasks to others. By the same token it is entirely different to the equal, but opposite, error into which it is easy for us to descend, that of micro-managing those who have been given responsibility.

The effective Oversight Minister will continue to journey with those to whom responsibility has been given, meeting regularly with them to reflect on joys and challenges to do with their responsibility, to help them problem solve, and to enable them to think creatively about the tasks they face. This is akin to the beneficial kind of parenting which does not try to solve all the problems a child is facing, but rather which stands with the child as they make their own



positive responses. It is an approach which understands that the growth of the leader is at least as important as the accomplishment of particular tasks.

4. BEING A CATALYST FOR NEW MISSIONAL INITIATIVES

Although, in this scheme, leadership responsibility is widely dispersed and shared with others, the Oversight Minister has particular responsibility to ensure that attention is paid to new initiatives which the Holy Spirit might want to prompt us towards. This is by no means to imply that the Oversight Minister is expected to have a monopoly on fresh thinking and new ideas. However, it is his/her responsibility to play a catalytic role in the uncovering of such initiatives. It is vital for the Oversight Minister to make sure that space is given to reflecting on; how God might be leading us, what we are observing as potential new areas of opportunity within our communities, and on which areas of our corporate life may need attention or reframing.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

One of the most significant reasons for the current crisis in the life of the Church in our nations is the infantilising of the whole people of God. Too little has been done to educate and inform people about their calling to share in the ministry of God, and too few opportunities have been given to people to engage in such ministry. Helicopter pastoring has led to an overly passive laity.

If the kingdom workforce is to be stirred and released, then ordained ministers will need to deploy themselves far more intentionally and rather differently from the ways in which they have often done. The transition to *Oversight Ministry* may well be a useful summary of what will be involved in such a transition.

