

THRIVING, NOT JUST SURVIVING IN MULTI-PARISH BENEFICES

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'My churches are like children – all wanting more of my time,' so said one vicar. My work with multi-parish benefices suggests many clergy and lay leaders could say the same. The pressure to be seen in each church, support every event, take services, care for people and look after buildings – not to mention occasional offices – is relentless. How can we work more effectively, and with a heart for mission, when faced with several demanding parishes?

LET GO

Maybe a first step out of being overwhelmed is to acknowledge that our traditional expectations of what a vicar does just cannot work for multiple churches or congregations. These expectations are remarkably persistent in the minds of our church members and maybe we put them on ourselves too – even when we know rationally that they are impossible. However, even starting a conversation with our PCCs, church wardens and congregations about expectations can kick-start the change.

Encouraging everyone to examine and then let go of traditional expectations can prove quietly freeing.

Will we let go?

SHARE AND SHARE AGAIN

In my work developing and facilitating Thrive learning communities for multi-parish benefices and teams, I am hugely impressed by how hard people – often older people – are willing to work and plan, pray and dream

towards different futures for their group of churches. Maybe there is more willingness to share the burden than we, as church leaders, realise.

However, it's not always easy for us to share responsibilities, maybe for several reasons:

- Because we have to give away some power and authority, and that's not always easy.
- Because, to start with, there may be more work as we train and help people take on new roles or tasks.
- Because maybe people will not fulfil the tasks or responsibility as well as we can do, especially in the early days.
- Also because they might do it better than us – and we can find that threatening.



There are real risks in this sort of sharing of responsibility – but also, in time, great support and new possibilities.

Will we share?

BE REFLECTIVE AND PROACTIVE

So much of Anglican ministry can end up being reactive – and even more so in a multi-church situation where the demands come in thick and fast. We have to be very determined to carve out time regularly to reflect on how things are going and actually do some planning around the relationships with the different churches.

Instead of thinking we must always respond to the cries of our churches – as to the cries of competing children – can we take time to step back, even for a moment, and work out our way forward?

No one model of relating to our churches will fit every situation – the realities on the ground are far too complex.

For some, there may be one larger church that dominates the group and care has to be taken to nurture the smaller ones too and ensure that the larger church is resourcing them rather than sucking all the energy from them.

For others, there may be one or more churches where the congregations have become so small and frail that questions of viability arise. The role of the priest or lay reader here will need much prayer. (On the other hand, in some such circumstances, a letter around a village explaining that the church will be closed for lack of support can bring enough responsive help to rekindle the church's life...)

Then again, it may be that one church, or a couple of churches are on fire with prayerful activity and mission growth. Maybe they are running family services, Messy churches, enquirers' groups, men's gatherings or hospitality events. This is where church leaders need to ask thoughtful questions as to how much energy to dedicate to those thriving places and how much to the less energetic ones. There is no one answer. However, if we have taken time to reflect and consult, at least we will have more confidence in deciding on and explaining our priorities, and defending them if necessary.

If we are willing and able to put aside regular time to think about how we best work with our churches, we can be more strategic and effective in our use of time and energy, even in the midst of many demands.

Will we be reflective and proactive?

EAT TOGETHER AND LOOK FOR GOD

It is no accident that Jesus gave us a way of worship centred around bread and wine. Something wonderful often happens to people as they share meals together. If we can get beyond

keeping the show on the road to making space for meals and celebrations together – with church leaders, with all ages together, with congregations coming together, in our homes, we encounter each other in new ways and often become aware of the presence of God with us.

Can we as leaders model hospitality – simple, friendly, welcoming – in our homes and in our churches to bless those who already come, and make it easy for others to join in?

Maybe then there can be a springing up of creativity and new ideas. I am encouraged again and again to see the imaginative ideas that emerge and are acted on as people spend time together, learning, eating, laughing, planning and praying together in our Thrive communities around the country.

It's easy to be worn down by the responsibilities of multi-parish ministries, but a commitment to radical, generous hospitality can give people the chance to relax and have fun.

Will we eat together and look for God?

COMMIT TO MISSION

Sometimes the Great Commission – Jesus' call at the end of Matthew's gospel to make disciples of all nations – seems a tall order. We are already fully occupied looking after the people, and buildings, that we already have. However, the call is still there, for all of us, and does not go away. That's where we need the creativity and imagination in our churches to be released.

I heard of a church recently where people were encouraged to take tiny steps towards mission. First to identify a part of their community – like a shop, school, club or pub – that they would pray for regularly. Then to go to visit and gently mention they were praying for them. Then to ask if there was any way the church could support or serve that place or group. And so on. Small, manageable steps – ways for ordinary churchgoers to bless their community. Who knows what might come of it?

Will we commit to mission?

I wonder, as you've read this, whether something has particularly stood out for you? As we consider the questions raised, maybe we can pray for wisdom as to whether God wants us respond in some way.

We certainly pray, in the name of Jesus, for blessing and guidance for each other as we work out how to do things in our own patch, and how to follow God's leading.