

WHAT DOES LOCAL EPISCOPAL LOOK LIKE?

BY PAM MACNAUGHTON

The vicar looked pained as the speaker at the front talked about the role of clergy needing to change if churches and ministers in all settings, but particularly in multi-parish benefices (MPBs), are to thrive. 'But...' he interrupted, unable to stay quiet any longer, '... but this is not what I was called to do. It's not what I was trained to do. It's not what I want to do.'

WHAT HAD BEEN SAID THAT WAS SO DIFFICULT?

The speaker was challenging the persistent belief of many clergy and congregations that it is possible to do ministry for four, six, ten or even more churches in the same way that it has always been done in the past with the 'one vicar, one church' model. The speaker was suggesting that the attempt by clergy to do everything, to attend every event and personally to offer pastoral care to everyone is for them a prelude to burnout, whilst for congregations it is a recipe for frustration. However, heroic attempts are often being made to do just that because generations have expected that this is what a 'real vicar' should do.

In addition, of course, change is often painful, and sometimes we would rather continue with costly heroism rather than face change. The vicar quoted above was one of many expressing the struggle and anxiety of having to re-think things.

How, then, can we face the changes demanded by contemporary ministry situations with creativity and vision, rather than despair? Maybe these three thoughts may help.



1. Vocation changes over time

The Spirit of God is always doing new things, and therefore God's call on us is always to grow and flex and risk doing new things, or old things in new ways, as we respond to God's leading. Lay or ordained, ready obedience to the will of God will involve change and development. If we want to stay responsive to God's call, there will always be ways of doing things that we need to lay down, good though they may have been, in order to work with God on the new things he is doing. The first disciples often discovered this in dramatic ways – think of Peter learning to include the Gentiles (Acts 10), or Philip leading the Ethiopian eunuch to faith (Acts 8:26-40).

2. There are opportunities for growth here

While we may agree that the old ways are not working, there's no one sure-fire model for how to do things in multi-parish benefices that will guarantee flourishing. However, there are opportunities for growth, for all sorts of people, in having to do things in new ways. Where no one individual can do everything any more, there are opportunities for, among many other good things, shared responsibility, deepening of faith, the emergence of gifts and strengths in people who maybe were unaware of

them, a greater commitment to prayer and the discovery of new leaders.

3. It's not just in MPBs

It would be easy to think that the changes we need are only in places with team ministries or multiple parishes with one vicar, but that's not true. Even with 'one vicar, one church', there may well be multiple congregations meeting in a church building and several fresh expressions of church growing in different places. In these situations too, of course, clergy cannot do everything and a sharing of the discernment and living out of vision is essential.

There is a saying gaining currency at the moment that, as far as I know, originated with the Bishop of Carlisle. He suggests that in the current climate in the Church of England:

'Bishops need to be more apostolic,
priests need to be more episcopal,
and lay people need to be more priestly'.

I understand that to mean that everyone needs to take more responsibility for the life of our churches. It's not about professionals and passive receivers. It's about the priesthood of all believers.

The question is what that might look like on the ground. For the clergy, if the saying is right, then 'local episcopal' will probably include the following:

1. Training others in ministry

If we're hoping to do ministry together, clergy will need to become more adept at spotting gifts that God has given people and helping them to develop those gifts – either through training them directly or finding other appropriate training.

2. Giving people opportunities

Training is great but often people learn most when putting training into practice – so giving people the opportunity to do things, and try things, and then reflecting with them and helping them grow is vital. Giving away power and responsibility does demand a generous helping of grace.

3. Modelling ministry

None of this means that clergy stop doing ministry themselves. They need to keep modelling the things they are good at, and finding other people to model well in the areas where they are weaker themselves.

4. Seeing the big picture

While discerning God's vision for a church or group of churches thus becomes a shared endeavour, the clergy need to hold the first responsibility for articulating and reminding people of that vision in all congregations. Churches with a sense of purpose are more likely to grow, in both discipleship and numbers.

In his new book, *Multi-congregation Ministry*, Malcolm Grundy writes:

'The task of oversight at any level of responsibility is to ensure that competing demands do not cause an organisation to descend into chaos, or stagnation, but energise it towards new life.'¹

Clergy acting more like bishops or overseers at the local level will need to juggle many responsibilities, in a way that helps things move forward. They will need to invest time and energy into key individuals so as to enable churches to grow. They will need to train people and model the ministry they want to see happen. They will need to hold on to the big picture and manage layers of complexity.

For some clergy, the thought of embracing such a role is painful – as for the vicar quoted earlier. However, the potential for delight in seeing churches grow and people discovering and using their gifts in the service of God is enormous. My hope and prayer is that, in a situation where more and more local clergy are in situations with multiple congregations, many will find new life and direction as they take on the challenge of ministering in a more episcopal way.

¹*Multi-congregation Ministry*, Malcolm Grundy, Canterbury Press 2015, page 117.



FOR REFLECTION

1. Whatever your leadership role in your local church or churches, how might God be calling you to take more responsibility?
2. How can you help others to grow in faith and in using their gifts?
3. What might 'local episcopal' look like where you are?