

Local preachers: a URC perspective



On a Sunday evening in January 1979, just before I was 19, I first led worship and preached at Hatfield Heath United Reformed Church on the Essex / Hertfordshire border. In the ensuing 36 years I have ‘ascended the pulpit steps’ just under 2500 times.

A great many things have altered in those years. Often we no longer ascend steps, mostly we ‘no longer do the job ourselves’ as worship is increasingly collaborative.

A defining moment for me was very personal. In 1983 my mother died; I was relatively young, but we knew her death was coming. The folk in the Churches I was due at on the Sunday between Mother’s death and her funeral suggested that I may like to be relieved of my appointments. I thought, prayed and concluded that if the point of what we do is about continuity after death, didn’t avoiding the issue undermine the point? That was me cast in a pattern that has not altered.

I have couple of golden rules:

1. Never renege on an appointment.
2. Always say yes to the first to ask.

The second of those rules has meant that I have balanced working in village, market town, county town, seaside and city churches alike. URC people are all the same – welcoming, grateful and open to such messages from the Holy Spirit as get through the rather opaque filter of (my) human thought.

In the last 20 years or so I have moved away from repeating old material and always start with something new, even if I do have two (or three) commitments on a Sunday. People ask how I find the time; that is the easy part – everyone’s alarm clock can be wound back; mine gets turned back far enough to make sure that preparation is always done properly, with time for reflection and to the best of my God given ability.

The URC is a wonderful place to serve as it affords people like me the great privilege, and responsibility, of having the freedom to pray about what we think and then say what we think, with conviction. We are not forced into patterns, though I love the rhythm of the liturgical year and we are not compelled to give certain messages. Each congregation makes its own worship arrangements, so one can always be sure that ‘if they ask you they want you’.

Much is said about the continuing numerical decline of the denomination. It is interesting to reflect that over the years of my experience decline has afflicted the middle sized and larger congregations most severely. The village chapels always were self-contained and resilient and they remain that way, often doing valuable work as a key focal point and support mechanism for their loyal people. If such a group says, ‘please bring us God’s word’, it is a hard-hearted person who claims overwork and rejects their call.

Tiring and relentless, yes, but God’s work!

William Glasse
Lay Preacher, United Reformed Church
william@glasse.org.uk

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