

The day the vicar leaves: developing the ministry of lay people



‘Training curates disempowers churches,’ remarked retired Archdeacon Tim Raphael to me during a consultation on lay ministry. ‘My biggest regret as I left my final church was that I had failed to train them to face the future. They had great curates but not a great future.’

I started my current post four years ago, knowing that I would not be given a curate, my two Readers were shortly retiring and my colleague, a self-supporting priest, was cutting back on Sunday ministry due to age. Seven churches in seven villages with seven PCCs. What’s my strategy?

I find my diocese’s emphasis on the training of individuals neither helpful nor sustainable. Talk of ‘individual vocations’ is disempowering when it distracts from training the gathered church in mission and ministry.

Through developing as disciples all Christians have a vocation to different forms of ministry and mission. Roland Allen in *Missionary Methods: St Paul’s or Ours?* remarks on how short a time Paul spends with a church before he expects the shared Christian leadership in each district to be capable of modelling their ministry on his.

So, in my benefice the church ‘called out’ a local ministry team. The seven churches were asked ‘Who has the Christian values required to enable and encourage Christ’s gifts in others?’ And a list of 35 provided by the churches was whittled down (once approached) to a Local Ministry Team (LMT) of 19 volunteers, and eventually to the 14 who trained as a team.

Some of these, with others not on the LMT, form the group of people who trained on a nine-week diocesan course to become worship leaders. One trick for training large groups is to ask the diocesan trainers to come to your benefice. Localised training, usually on an afternoon, is essential to holding a sense of ‘team’.

Another trick is to train people before they do the course by modelling ministry with them. This includes leading prayers in multi-various ways, or doing the ‘not-the-sermon’ slot with me, or trialling a new form of liturgy for tots and school services; all this done before the course is run, and done together. The team then bring this enthusiasm, energy, creativity and prayer into their diocesan training. Possibilities open-up.

And the church basically knows that without this training the church will disappear. We are too small and too rural for a curate to save the day for us; so we have to ‘grow our own’ multi-various ministers. Already emerging are Spirit-given ‘needful gifts of grace’:

- Visiting skills in pastoral care, particularly to the bereaved.
- Three *Open The Book* teams touching the lives of our three primary schools with an acted-out bible-story each week.
- A Family Development Project shaping a future ministry to children and families.
- New forms of ‘Service of the Word’, replacing priest-centred village Eucharist.

A sustainable and creative future is emerging for us. It is exhausting for me as the vicar putting my time into training the church, but I’m expecting that investing my time in training people will start to pay real dividends in my seventh year. Which is about the time when the vicar might be planning to move elsewhere...

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