

The Diocese of Gloucester

EFFECTIVE MINISTRY IN EVERY PARISH

Working together to renew the mission and ministry of the church

A Ministry of the whole people of God throughout the Diocese

Many of the assumptions in this paper are already deeply embedded in the life of the Diocese. In brief, what is being suggested here is that there will be:

- A sustained commitment to the principles of shared, local ministry. We reaffirm our belief that a whole church community is commissioned for “local ministry” and local ministry teams exist to encourage others to develop their discipleship
- Resident ministers (usually OLM priests, but not always so - see below) living within their community embodying the presence and ministry of the church in their particular place and exercising, with others, a ministry of word and sacrament, and pastoral care.
- Incumbents with a strategic role, giving leadership to large benefices, exercising a ministry of oversight, and working with and through local parsons in each community.
- Pioneer ministers and chaplains of different sorts working through non-geographical networks.

Ministry in the Diocese should then:

- Provide a model the ministry of the whole people of God
- strengthen the sense of Christian presence,
- reinvigorate the parish as a basic unit of ministry and mission,
- affirm local shared leadership
- and so reverse decline and build the Kingdom

A Ministry of Christ

In Christ, the life of God and our human lives are reconciled, sin is defeated, hope restored. The vocation of the Church is to celebrate and proclaim that gospel of reconciliation. The life and ministry of the Church is simply a call to be ‘in Christ’ and it depends on the power of the Spirit who draws us into the fellowship of Christ. We are one community, with one vocation. All Christians share in the one life and all Christians have gifts of the Spirit to share in ministry. Renewed enthusiasm for these truths has led us, in the last few decades, to a renewed recognition of the ministry of all the baptised. In the 1990s the Diocese of Gloucester expressed its commitment to this principle by adopting a model of ‘local ministry’. This has been remarkably successful in the establishment of local ministry teams in many parishes and, as a by-product, the emergence of specific forms of ministry from within these teams. More fundamentally there has been, in many parishes, a change of culture, and people have begun to see that the work of ministry is not what the clergy do, assisted by lay people, but what lay people and clergy do together, in collaboration.

Of course, there is still plenty of work to do in building confidence and good practice in shared ministry.

Ministry in the Church

The Church’s mission and ministry in the coming decades in the Diocese of Gloucester must be delivered by the whole people of God and modelled by ministry teams of various sorts. Living out that vocation, the church needs priests and people— neither will ever be a substitute for the other.

Without people, there is no church and no ministry. Without priests, there is always the risk that one church and one ministry will be divided into a confusion of gifts. So, in order to liberate the people of God, who embody the ministry of Christ, to become what they should be, we turn to those who will accept responsibility for 'the ordering of the Church's ministry' (*Introduction to the Ordination Services*). This is a primary task of the Ordained Ministry, of those in 'Holy Orders'. Put simply, the Church needs people who will enable the church to be the church. The task of the ordained ministry is a bit like the task of a conductor who works with gifted people enabling them to use their gifts together – each needs the other to do what they are called to do.

The 'mixed economy'

Ministry then, takes many forms and the ordained ministry seeks to provide order. Good order is creative and liberating. We talk about 'a mixed economy' now as we try to do justice to the fact that God's grace is not constrained and does not have to fit a particular programme. We are beginning to recognise just how important the local setting is and learning a proper reverence for relationships that grow naturally in particular places. Prescriptive strategies can actively undermine church communities as places in which people can thrive, participate and develop a sense of identity. We know that 'Master plans' and 'one size fits all' models cannot, of themselves, create kingdom communities. The real challenge now is to leave some room for the Grace of God to work naturally, nurturing healthy Christian people in lively communities.

Each locality will be different. The strategy set out here is intended to encourage variety. It is also acknowledged that there are other strategies too, and other ministries than those explored here. In particular there are crucial contributions made by deployable Non-Stipendiary clergy, by Readers and by Pioneer Ministers.

The Parish as the Local Unit of Ministry

Recognising the real significance of local communities we can accept with gratitude the inheritance we have in our parochial structure. Our parishes are still one of our fundamental resources in ministry and mission. For centuries the delivery of local ministry and mission in the Church of England has been through the parish system. Although we speak of it as a pastoral model, it has never been only that, but always a model of commitment to the whole community. In our own day we have seen huge changes. We know that people now live their lives with less dependence on the geographical community in which they have their home. They relate to others through different networks. As community has changed ministry has changed with the emergence of multi-parish benefices, new patterns of local shared ministry and pioneer ministries engaging with non-geographical networks.

But the parish system is still crucial as the normative unit of local ministry, even if much of its mission is delivered through collaboration across a benefice or a deanery. It continues to stand for the Church's sense of ministry to everyone; in the parish system no-one is outside its compass. It witnesses to the fact that we are not called into associations of those who are like us, we are called, as human beings, to live in fellowship with all our neighbours, even those who are different from ourselves. A parish is not a network of the like-minded and so it gives expression to the wonderful diversity of communion into which God calls us.

Of course, there are some parishes that are no longer really viable as units of ministry and mission. Where a parish cannot sustain a viable church congregation, make a financial contribution to the common purse, fill the statutory parochial offices, it needs to be brought within another parish. There are about 320 parishes in the diocese. Possibly as many as 50 of these are not viable long term as independent units. Even so, there could be more than 250 parishes where the presence of an easily identified resident minister would be a huge boost to the Church's ministry.

A Presence in each Community

Circumstances over recent decades (more to do with clergy numbers than finance) have caused us to amalgamate livings, create united benefices, sell parsonages and give clergy pastoral care of a large number of parishes. Although there are clearly other reasons for the decline in church membership, there is little doubt that the disappearance of the local parson, living in the community and being seen within it and leading worship each Sunday has been a major factor. People simply do not know who their vicar is in some larger, rural benefices. They certainly cannot expect to see him/her week by week on Sunday. Nor can they rely on there being a service at a predictable time each Sunday in their parish church.

- ii) We need to recover our confidence in the parish as a healthy unit, reassert our commitment to the ministry of all, recognise the particular ministry of the ordained and remind ourselves that the parish church is a place where a pattern of worship can sustain the community and deepen its spirituality. The first two marks of mission are a challenge to us to build visible communities that worship in particular places. To do this we need particular people in those particular places. We need ministers around whom the community can gather. We need holy people who will be a focus as we discover and celebrate our common vocation to holiness. A church that proclaims the incarnation should not be afraid of focusing presence in a person - we know that is the way God works. Nor should we be too reluctant to talk of a "holy person". People might shy away from thinking themselves such a person, but we must encourage holiness and name it when we see it. We need, within the community, those whom others recognise as men and women close to God, sustained by prayer and scripture and sacrament, who seek to model Christian life and who are ready to express the hope that is in them. This is what the church's ministry, at its best, has always done.
- iii) So, a Church committed to mission and enthusiastic about shared ministry needs more priests. It needs more priests because Christian community flourishes when a local church meets and has within it the marks and life of Christ's universal church. Just as God's reconciling purpose was revealed in Christ, ministry needs a focus in particular individuals. The wider community can only gather in Christ when it meets in particular places around particular people.
- iv) The proposal that follows is for a process that would discern vocations, give formation and training and lead to ordination or licensing of up to 200 ministers (most, though not all of them, priests), living in their communities, sharing in the ministry of all, under the oversight of a stipendiary incumbent. It is a vision for a renewed commitment to the local church and to worship and ministry in the communities in which we live.

Sustaining the local church

The reality within the diocese today is that ministry is unevenly provided. There are a large number of multi-parish rural benefices, where a stipendiary priest serves anything between three and eight communities. In one such benefice there may be an active Local Ministry Team, a House for Duty priest, a non-stipendiary, or ordained local, minister and more than one reader, and perhaps an active retired priest too. In another there may be none of these. Without a clear diocesan strategy this kind of discrepancy is inevitable. A multi-parish benefice where there is no

“team” of any sort is ill-equipped for growth and mission; indeed it is in sharp danger of fast decline.

It will always be the case that some things will be better done at a benefice or deanery level. There is simply not the critical mass in some parishes for some aspects of church life to flourish. There is a widespread reluctance to come together and some might fear that a parson in every parish would reinforce isolationism. However it is much more likely that parishes will be encouraged into activity across the benefice or deanery by a local advocate who can share the vision with them. When they have no such advocate, they often see their role as defending the local at all costs. Indeed they can become more defensive of the local church building, because it is all they have left. If they had a parson, the building would not be the only sign of the presence of God. Local ‘parsons’ ought to make for less isolationism, not more.

Ordained Local Ministers

It was always part of the original vision of Local Ministry that, from our shared ministry teams, would emerge a person or persons whose gifts might lead them to ordination as an “ordained local minister”. Others in the team would see their gifts develop in other ways and always and everywhere there would be an eye to the growth of discipleship and ministry in the whole parish. It was important not to urge that part of the vision at too early a stage; teaching about the ministry of the whole people of God was the priority. Nevertheless there have been vocations to OLM ministry over recent years emerging from LMTs and we are now at a point where we need to recover the part of the vision that sees their emergence as a natural element in renewing parish ministry.

Recently our Local Ministry Scheme has become more flexible. We will not want to reintroduce a more prescriptive tone in encouraging an OLM ministry to emerge. Sometimes a vocation will be discerned in a parish where no team is existence, but where there is a willingness to form one around the candidate. If we are to be flexible, we have to say that, whereas a candidate usually emerges from a team, sometimes the candidate comes first and the supportive team follows. We will need to reflect on proper process if such teams are to be effective and to grow as they should. We might explore whether it is possible for people called to non-stipendiary ministry, to be placed in parishes where no indigenous minister had emerged. Again, it would be important to put a team in place around them, but even then there would be a question about how *local* their ministry could ever be.

What we must not to allow is the emergence of candidates for this ministry who will be left on their own, rather than nurtured and supported within a group of others committed to shared ministry. We should not allow it, partly because we would be asking too much of a person working on their own. But, more fundamentally, we should not allow it because it would allow the personal focus to be too great - these ministers must be people who can release the ministry of the whole Church and work as a member of a collaborative team.

The Parson

What is envisaged here could be described as a vision for *A Parson in Every Parish*. We need to identify that it will not always be a priest, but a person (and the word ‘parson’ has the same root) who might be recognised as a representative figure of Christ and of his Church in the community. This person-parson would be someone whose gifts would already be known and acknowledged locally. Clearly, they would be people around whom the community could gather and people able to work in a team, but in the process of testing their vocation we would also need to identify gifts in leading worship, Christian teaching and pastoral care. Others might well have some of these same gifts, but in the person-parson these gifts would somehow hold together. Above all, in them, others would see a deeply attractive holiness of life speaking of the presence of God.

There are Readers who have these qualities and this kind of relationship with their community. Some of them would be person-parsons and a few might move to an ordained role, as deacon or priest. Others might be clear that their calling was to remain in the Office of a Reader. However, it seems likely that, in the majority of cases, this particular calling will be experienced as a vocation to priesthood. It is in the Eucharist that the ministry we all share with Christ finds its fullest expression. Christian communities eager to develop that shared ministry, will also be eager to identify one who can preside when their communion is made. So, more often than not, the parson will be a priest.

The Incumbent

The relationship of the parson with the local community is of the essence. His, or her, relationship with the incumbent will also be crucial. These parsons will not become incumbents of separated parishes. Their role is not to create new hierarchies, but to foster discipleship and shared ministry in particular localities. The incumbent of a multi-parish benefice would exercise a ministry of oversight (an *episcopal* role) in relation to those working with him/her. In their relationship the incumbent and local ministers would need to hold before the Church another instance of collaborative ministry at work.

Inevitably, the role of the stipendiary incumbent would begin to change - the more so in the very large benefices where there would be five, six, seven or more parsons. The incumbent would be required to learn that more episcopal role, perhaps to be a teacher and trainer, and to develop the skills to hold together in collaborative working the clergy and the teams. He/she would still be a parish priest, perhaps the parson of one of the parishes, but no longer required to rush from place to place, especially on a Sunday, on an endless treadmill of duties in different communities.

Vocation

One of the very good things that has emerged from the OLM movement in recent decades has been the recovery of the sense that vocation does not always begin as an inner call. Instead vocation may be recognised first by a community that sees the gifts and the potential in an individual and points the finger, "We believe God is calling you." Of course that vocation needs to be tested and validated by the Church through the Bishop and those who advise him and indeed the individual, at whom the finger has been pointed, needs also to recognise that this call is in accordance with God's will.

God will continue to plant a sense of vocation in individuals, but calling by a community exploring what it means to share the ministry of Christ will be a significant part of the way the Church's ministry is built up and will be particularly so if there is to be a parson in every parish.

Residing in the local church

It is of the essence of Local Ministry that an OLM priest will normally serve their entire ministry in the place in which they were called and to which they were ordained. Their vocation emerges locally and belongs in the community of gifts in a particular place. This has important implications for them when they reach an age when they ought to move from licensed ministry to permission to officiate in retirement (often at 70, always by 75). At this point they will nearly always continue to live in the community to which they have been parson and they and those around them will need sensitivity in making the transition, as one priest remains in the community where a new one has taken his/her place.

Formation and Training

There are complex issues to be resolved in relation to formation and training if there is to be a parson in every parish. Genuinely shared local ministry will take different shape in different people

and different places. As communities identify vocations we will need to respond with grace and delight to new 'shapes' of ministry. Yet the Bishop will also have to safeguard the worship and teaching of the church and continue to impress upon candidates for ordination the need for formation.

Although we must hope for some young candidates for the ministry of person-parson, it is inevitable that a large number of those able to give the time to such a ministry will be older. The Bishop has the freedom to ordain candidates over 60 without a national selection procedure. In these cases he may decide what their formation and training shall be and the period it will last. For the under 60s, where there are national norms to respect, there is already more flexibility than in the past about recognising the validity of previous training (as a Reader, for instance) in assessing how much formation and training is needed before ordination. However, if there are to be large numbers of candidates going through training at any one time, there will need to be yet more flexibility in the way that formation and training is delivered, not least its delivery at more local centres than is possible at present.

The urban setting

Much of this paper relates to the multi-parish rural setting, which is predominant in the Diocese of Gloucester. However the majority of our people live in towns. Can the language of "a parson in every parish" be applied to the urban setting? The language may need some translation, but the basic need is not so very different. Even in the towns we are seeing the creation of more pluralities that will lead to multi-parish benefices, as well the emergence of formal team ministries and less formal mission areas and network communities. There is a shortage of priests in our urban parishes too and a lack of NSMs, especially in the City of Gloucester.

In the urban situation, we might speak more often of "a parson for every church" or "a parson for every community", rather than for every parish, but people still need to be able to look to one person who is their first port of call in pastoral terms and the person with immediate responsibility for the worship of the church they attend.

Challenges

Five very clear challenges present themselves.

- How do we change the culture and replace the widespread view that ministry is ordained, stipendiary and professional and that vocation is individual and within with this renewed vision?
- How do we identify vocations to this particular form of ministry? How do we encourage men and women to take proper confidence in the calling the community sees in them, and in their own holiness and gifts? How do we encourage them to take on the demands of formation as ministers of word, sacrament and pastoral care?
- How do we devise a system of formation and training that will be properly challenging and fit for purpose without being so demanding that candidates felt unable to undertake it?
- How do we provide the resources, both human and financial, especially in terms of vocations staff and those delivering formation and training?
- How do we equip our existing stipendiary clergy for a new role in oversight?

Wider Perspectives

This is a particular initiative in the mission and ministry of the Diocese. It will take its place alongside other initiatives and our commitment to sustaining all that is best in what we have inherited. Taken together with Mission Action Planning, with policies for deaneries, and for parishes with limited resources, this document is part of a strategy for ministry and mission in the Diocese and it articulates some of the theology that sustains that strategy. Because it is only part

of the whole however, there are significant elements of the overall strategy that are not represented here. There will be other opportunities to correct this deficit, but it might be timely to acknowledge that there is more work to do in the following areas:

1. **Mission.** We have already made a commitment to the mixed economy that has been commended by the Archbishop of Canterbury with the appointment of pioneer ministers, the encouragement of fresh expressions of church and support for faith sharing and parochial mission initiatives. The recent appointment of a Diocesan Missioner was another step in developing and refreshing our commitment to this mixed economy.
2. **The College of Clergy.** This paper has concentrated on developing the role of Ordained Local Ministers and has explored a little of their relationship with stipendiary clergy. We remain committed to identifying and developing vocations to Non-stipendiary Ministry and to House for Duty Ministry. Such clergy, because their training and experience will have been the same or similar to that of their stipendiary colleagues, will be a valuable resource complementing the roles of both stipendiary priests and OLMs in the new structures. The flexibility that comes with these clergy being deployable will facilitate the development of the proposed new structures into forms appropriate to particular localities, and at the same time allow the future form of their own ministries to evolve. It is a fundamental assumption in this paper that ministry takes a variety of forms and clergy who serve in Non-stipendiary, or House for Duty, Ministry are not just assistants and associates, they are ambassadors for a more flexible and accessible ordained ministry.
3. **Licensed Ministry in the Diocese.** Recent years have seen more licensed lay workers deployed in specialist posts across the Diocese. Arrangements to provide them with resources for in-service training and to offer them review are no win place. Meanwhile, Reader Ministry continues to be a crucial resource for us, but it has, perhaps, been a little neglected as attention has been focussed elsewhere. A major report, coming to General Synod soon, coupled with significant initiatives being taken by the Warden of Readers and the Reader Committee should help to redress the balance.
4. **Local Ministry.** This paper relies heavily on the work of Local Ministry Teams. With all the talk about a more flexible style to Local Ministry it is time to reiterate the core principle. The heart of our commitment to Local Ministry is not the desire to produce Ordained Local Ministers; it is not even the business of producing teams. The vision of Local Ministry is the ministry of all God's people, it is radically inclusive. It is a vision that will take different shapes in different places and the Local Ministry Officers work to provide resources and encouragement to every parish and benefice seeking to enable God's people to live out their vocation of praise and service. All our strategy is directed at sustaining the Christian community as it celebrates the grace of God by using the gifts He has given in the service of his world.

In this attainable?

None of this can happen without facing the challenges described above and without serious debate, teaching and encouragement of vocations. It cannot, in any case, be delivered over-night even with goodwill and shared vision. A parson in every parish is an objective for perhaps seven years down the line. But what is already in place needs to gather momentum and some new thinking needs to find its way into the conversation at parish, deanery and diocesan level if there is to be more than an pious dream. It could be more than that.

It could renew the life and mission and ministry of the Diocese of Gloucester. That is an exciting prospect.

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