

LIVING FAITH SERMON SERIES:
5. SHAPING CONFIDENT COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Introduction

And so we come to the last of our series on the Bishop's "Living Faith" priorities. They are all being posted on the website and so if you have missed any, you can read them there – or ask me and I can produce a hard copy for you.

And, although it has been a shame not to explore the Lenten liturgical readings, I hope that you may have found this exercise useful in helping us to link in with where the diocese is and what our Bishop is encouraging us to think about.

So far we have covered:

1. Sustaining the sacred centre
2. Making disciples
3. Making a difference in society
4. Creating vibrant Christian communities

and we now come to the last: Shaping confident, collaborative leadership.

And, just as the first of the five gives the spiritual grounding for all the others, so the last addresses the practicalities of how any of these are actually to get off the ground at all.

There needs to be leadership.

But what kind of leadership??

This, I think is the key question for us to face in our day.

1. Once upon a time....

For, once upon a time church leadership was like this:

In a parish of 200 souls and possibly more than one priest to serve them, the Vicar did virtually everything except playing the organ and arranging the flowers.

- all the visiting
- all the services
- all the preaching
- all the administration
- all the baptisms, weddings and funerals & related visits
- all the pastoral care

Everyone in the village regarded themselves as members of the church and would come to the church when they were in need.

And, of course, "Father knew best"! on all matters!

No one questioned the Vicar's complete knowledge of all things.

If anything needed to happen, it needed the Vicars approval.

And Father stayed for a very long time, literally becoming "church" itself: people would talk about clergy "going into the church" as if only the clergy were really church at all.

Everyone else just "came to church".... and went away again!

2. But how things have changed:

The job of parish priest has changed out of all recognition from those days

a. Context

- We have a parish of 11,000 souls with one permanent full time paid priest. (We are unusually lucky to have retired clergy and curates here.)
- 95% of those have virtually nothing to do with church life, meaning people generally do not come to us anymore but we have to go out in creative, time consuming ways, if we are to have any contact with the vast majority of people in the area
- culture and therefore the spiritual needs of people have become much more diverse and require a great deal more than just “doing the prayer book”

b. administration, as in all professions, has become far more of a burden

c. our desire to link with all sorts of other organisations in the community has changed enormously the shape of the job

3. A new model

Well, we have been in transition from the old outdated model of church for sometime, but in many ways, we are really only just beginning to grasp what the new model might really mean. So it would seem helpful to remind ourselves what the new model is in order to help us to keep moving towards it.

a. Priesthood of all believers

The key theological principle here draws on the seminal phrase found in Peter’s epistle: “The priesthood of all believers”.

New Testament priesthood is no longer about one person doing things on behalf of everyone else, but about a whole people doing something on behalf of the world around them.

Church, of course, is all of us (it simply comes from a Greek word meaning “the gathering”) and we, together, have a priestly ministry in this community: the ministry of enabling one another and our local community to engage with and receive all the goodness that God is offering us through Jesus and through creation.

b. Talent and ability.

A key aspect that goes with this is the recognition that, actually, the Vicar isn’t universally knowledgeable or talented.

Indeed there are many people in the congregation who are much more knowledgeable, talented or trained in certain areas than the Vicar.

It would be much better, then, if they used their talents where they are better able to do various tasks.

c. The role of the ordained clergy

So what becomes of the role of the ordained clergy. Can we do away with them altogether??!!

Well, first, this is not as amusing a proposition as it sounds since, in many areas, there are so few ordained clergy that that is, indeed, what is pushing them to think harder about what clergy are really for.

I still, however, (of course) think there is a very important role for the clergy but it is shifting quite radically from where we once were.

It becomes, it seems to me, much more about encouraging and enabling the people of God to take up their own priestly ministry.

The whole thing is then stood on its head as we talk, not in terms of the people helping the Vicar to do his job – but rather in terms of the Vicar helping the people to do their job.

We do seem to be heading in the direction of reducing numbers of clergy and when we come to the point of one Anglican priest for the whole of Headington, we will be forced to think very radically.

But, actually, if we were willing to think this radically now – so much more could be achieved.

But the ordained clergy, selected, trained and formed in the tradition of the church's wisdom do have more than just a managerial or training role:

- there is the issue of power and its abuse: Pete Rollins, who goes on about the leaders of the church needing to relinquish power, was asked whether the church really needed clergy then. To which he very strongly replies: yes, of course the church needs clergy: in order to stop anyone else taking up power!!
- In other words it is very important to have people who are charged with modelling what Christian priestly ministry is about – this is a huge responsibility and we need to be constantly brought to task about how we are doing,
- but to have a visible focus for our ministry would seem to me to be very important.

d. The “Ascension principle”

I once heard someone talking about modelling his priestly ministry on the “Ascension Principle”

By this he meant: setting up a ministry alongside others, training and enabling others to do it alongside him and then “disappearing”!!

In recent months we have seen this principle work with the setting up of the new HT4U service.

For 4 months I worked with members of the congregation to get the service going with my taking a prominent role.

And then I went on holiday! And the service was very ably led by lay members of the church with support from Alastair.

And so now we are reverting to the service being broadly lay led with support from the clergy – rather than vice versa.

It is good that clergy are there but it could happen without us – in fact there is no reason why it should not be even better as we withdraw and people grow in confidence in their own gifts.

e. Taking responsibility while keeping in touch with the vision

This all needs a constant, two way process of

- genuine handing over of responsibility: with individuals willing to take up that responsibility.
- Whilst at the same time working within the agreed ethos, vision and values of the church – in our case these are laid out in our vision statement

If it is faithful to our vision statement, then I do not need to be asked (though I do like to be informed!)

4. Practicalities

a. Time & Commitment

This is a very big one in our day. People are very busy with many commitments and giving serious time and energy to taking up a significant responsibility in the church is a huge issue. I get a lot of people offering to help out, but far fewer offering to take up a responsibility and run with it - which is part of the reason that some people really are doing too much.

And so let me say that I am aware of this and I do sympathise.

I think it is very important for us as Christians to be modelling a balanced and healthy lifestyle and not just running around totally stressed like everyone else.

On the other hand we do need real commitment to areas of ministry if we are to achieve the quality to which we aspire.

How to square the circle so that ministry becomes a joy and a fulfilment rather than a burden and a duty we have long past enjoying.

I would like us to think in this church, about making serious commitments to a particular area of ministry, including being willing to put in significant time and to receive appropriate training....

BUT – that commitment would only be for a particular length of time.

Depending on the task, say: 3 to 5 years.

When people come to me and say they would like to step down because they have been doing something for a number of years, I very rarely see it as my job to persuade them to stay – however good they may be.

It is helpful to have notice so we can work on finding new people but the default answer you should expect is “yes – and thank you for your commitment over the time you have offered”

b. drawing in others

If we follow the above pattern, we need always to be thinking about the next generation of leadership in a particular area.

This means drawing others alongside us from the start – people who may be able to take over when we feel the need to step down.

c. Growing in confidence and skills

Growth in confidence and skills is also part of this. There is much good quality training being offered by the diocese nowadays on almost all areas of ministry. It may take time, but it will be worth it in terms of your increased fulfilment in doing the task.

d. Liberation, fulfilment and joy!

The idea for all of this is to set up a recipe for genuine fulfilment, freedom and joy in ministry. This really is how it should be and how it can be.

Yes there will be times when we just have to persevere with the hard graft because someone has to do it. But this is not the aim.

There is nothing more wonderful than discovering a gift within yourself, which you may not have realised that you had, growing in confidence in its use, being given real freedom to use it and develop it and at the same time realising that it is enhancing the life of the people of God if not the local community!.

Let us then work hard to shape confident, collaborative leadership in the church, for the sake of the growth of the Kingdom of God in this place.