

# **A Community of Brokenness held together in the Hand of God.**

- A testimony from a working class congregation.

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# **A Community of Brokenness held together in the Hand of God. - A testimony from a working class congregation.**

## **Janet**

It was eleven years ago when I arrived as the vicar at St. Mary Magdalene Lockleaze. The congregation was looking to escape ‘interregnum mode’. They had developed a sense of team under the leadership of their churchwardens, one of whom was Janet. Janet was a key player in recognising gifts. She spent much time in a wheelchair having been afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis. But while she might be seen as disabled she had been very enabling to the congregation. Fortunately I spotted what was going on and the last thing I was going to do was disrupt this state of affairs.

Lockleaze is a council built housing estate with an aging population and the congregation had been in numerical decline for many years. It wasn’t that it had no new people but that the arrival of new people was exceeded by the number of people lost by death and removal. It was the kind of place where the children of our elderly congregation would encourage them to move nearer to them because they would worry about their safety. So if the congregation gained two each year, it lost four. Its Sunday attendance is about 40.

Janet discovered a vocation to the priesthood. Her training had to be adapted as her health deteriorated. Her ordinations, as deacon and then priest, opened up possibility in the hearts and minds of the people. Janet summarised the vulnerability of our situation when she e-mailed me saying:-

*I have been thinking/praying since Friday and just something that keeps occurring to me. After hip op when my energy levels dropped right down I spent a lot of time feeling very trapped and constrained by not being able to do all the things that I wanted to do and thought I should be able to do. This is very frustrating when there seems so much to do and I just can't do it. What I have slowly and painfully come to realise is that it also is a gift from God, a freedom rather than handcuffs, in that I have to be very careful about what I focus my energy on which means I don't get side tracked into doing unnecessary things without thinking about them first. That isn't to say I don't get frustrated or always make the right choices, it is not an easy gift to live with however it does give God a chance to get a look in and to help me focus on the most important things. It has also meant I have had to face what I cannot do and let it go, a continuous process really but the flip side is being more aware of what is possible, and however small and insignificant it may seem, to keep doing it. It has also made me much more aware of the value of being and not doing and has given greater depth to my relationship with God. So many different things it's really hard to put it all into words.*

*It just keeps occurring to me that the situation at St Marys is not dissimilar we have limited resources in all kinds of ways; perhaps it is God's gift to us too and we need to look at honestly at what we can do with the resources we have, let go of the things we can't do, and allow God to help us focus and do what is most important. We may need to learn the value of just being church together rather than what we do as a church. The verse that I keep coming back to is Isaiah 30:15 in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength. Perhaps this is something for the church to ponder too.*

*I don't know if I have explained it very well but I wondered if it might be of any help Hope the PCC goes well*  
Janet

### **Joe (Me. The writer)**

I had a spell of illness too. There was the growing and subsequent removal of a bladder stone. The re-bore of the prostate. There were nearly two years of not being at full speed. Then I was invited to be Area Dean and did this for two or more years. These were important events in that the people of the parish could see good reason to keep the show on the road themselves while I was busy elsewhere. Finally I had a three month sabbatical which turned out to be a turning point in my ministry.

During my sabbatical I furthered my research into mission and working class culture. My commitment to the story that follows is that I am not as much concerned about the survival of the church in working class communities as I am in helping working class people joins God's mission to their own communities. My preoccupation is to enable people to talk about 'Faith' in their own language and culture. [*The universal Word only speaks dialect. (Casaldaliga,P.)*]

### **Elaine**

On my return from sabbatical I arranged to meet individually with Janet and the members of the standing committee of the PCC. That was seven people in all. Audrey, Alison, David, Elaine, Joyce, Margaret, Sandra and Tony, I outlined some of the things I had discovered during my sabbatical that were of concern.

The first was that over the last 10 years, the four largest congregations in City Deanery were on average loosing people at the same rate as the four smallest, of which we are one. This meant that

they were no more successful than us and that we had no need to copy them.

The second was that, although people in poorer communities contribute a greater percentage of their net disposable income to charities, we were, as a congregation, only meeting about between 1/3 and ¼ of our costs. This was not a problem in itself and my own view is that for the most part the giving of our congregation is good. The issue was more about where the other 2/3 to ¾ of our costs was coming from. The large churches were losing some 22% to 60% of their congregations over the last 10 years, what will their capacity, to contribute to our costs be in another 10 years, be?

Most people I spoke to thought it unlikely that the situation of others giving to meet our needs would go on for much longer.

The other issue, not coming out of my sabbatical, was that when I retire in approx 4 years time, it was considered by most of the standing committee that they had been lucky with my appointment and did not expect the attention of a full time stipendiary priest when I retire. It was also generally felt, that although Janet being ordained will be a great asset, her disability meant that she would not take the place of a vicar to the congregation. We expected her to explore fresh expressions of ministry based primarily from her home. I speculated that we might need to think about having another locally deployed unpaid priest. This would mean that with two priests it would be less likely that one would be expected to just step in the shoes of the departing vicar. Just the negotiating between two priests would mean that it would be more likely that expectations would not be assumed, especially if the role of lay people was included in the renegotiation.

So I asked each of the people who we could put forward to be ordained. Of the seven people, **five** named Elaine as their first choice, and **one** their second choice. The seventh person was Elaine herself who couldn't think of anybody.

A second name was put forward; once as a first choice, and twice as second choice.

Elaine was often named as an obvious choice, and one person named her as 'the closest we've got to anyone who could do it'.

As the naming of Elaine became a bit of a habit, I started to ask each person what were the qualities that they felt Elaine had which cause her to be suggested. The following were mentioned.

- She has worked at the Health Centre for years and everyone knows her.
- She writes lovely prayers. She doesn't just read them from a book.
- She visits lots of people.
- She takes Communion to the Housebound.
- She is helping at the Hospital Chaplaincy.

When I told Elaine that she had been highly chosen she was shocked. When she found some words, she said, 'I knew that God was calling me to something new but I didn't think it might be that!'

Having had a little time to think about it all, what she agreed to do is explore what the options were for her future ministry. She explored what God was calling her to be. This may have been a call to the priesthood, or it may be to some other ministry. If it were to the priesthood she would want to be part of a team and not as the lone vicar. The fact that Janet will be ordained as deacon in July 2006 and as priest July 2007 meant she would not be alone. Yet Elaine's

exploration would be best undertaken as part of us all trying to explore what God is calling all of us to do as part of the future calling of the church here in Lockleaze.

Janet and Elaine and I, at the request of the PCC, were exploring what we think it means to be a priest in the future Lockleaze. We asked the next PCC to place on the agenda an item to allow those attending to speak about what their expectations of what a future priest should be like. This was not because we think the ‘priest’ is the most important person, but because we think that unless we change our view of what a priest should be like it will be difficult to open up new opportunities for everyone else to engage with ministry in a new way. What follows is a summary of our thinking.

The Bishop encouraged us to proceed.

## **The Manifesto**

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**Communities of brokenness held together in the hand of God.**

*are there to treat life  
as a glorious mystery to be explored and enjoyed,  
and not only treat it as a number of problems to be solved.*

**The prime task of these communities  
is to worship God amongst our muddle  
and to grow in communion with God.**

This involves, both personally and together:-

- Discovering where God is in the ups and downs of our lives.
  - Calling attention to God’s splendour in the ordinary.
    - Respecting the creation that God has made.
    - Doing the right thing as God reveals.

*A priest is ordained to open up the mystery of God's beauty and love by:-*

- *Helping the community worship in word and sacrament.*
- *Hearing the complaints of the people*
- *Preaching about God, his kingdom, and his good news.*
- *Encouraging people to pray alone and together.*
- *Continuing to tell the story of Jesus.*
- *Pointing to the presence of the Holy Spirit.*
- *Insisting that God comes first.*
- *Reminding people of God's promise, invitation and command.*

**Others will have a part to play in these things too.**

**Priesthood is both focussed in ‘the priest’  
and shared among ‘the people’.**

The priest is **not** there to:-

- Run the church.
- Solve the problems.
- Tell other people what to do.
- Be the one who is most visible.
- Be the broker between the worshipping community and other groups.

The priest is there to give a lead in how we:-

1. explore the mystery of God's love for humankind
2. and how we learn to be in communion with Him.

With thanks to ‘The Contemplative Pastor’, by Eugene Peterson, published by Eerdmans

‘The Church with a Human Face’, by Edward Schillebeeckx, published by SCM.

‘Ministry and Priesthood’, by Alastair Redfern, DLT.

Elaine Mills, Janet Marker Joe Hasler.

## **Sandra**

We did try to see if we could re visit the process for Elaine. It seemed to us if the views of our standing committee could come to a common mind about Elaine being suited to the ministry of priest, this may also be true for other roles. We canvassed five roles, Administrator, Teacher, Community Minister, Care and Visiting Co-ordinator, Worship Leader. Sandra was highly chosen for the administrator because of her obvious leadership qualities and ability to get things done. Two other roles had a clear correlation between people and roles, but each had good reason to believe God was leading them in a different direction. So with Elaine as a potential priest and Sandra as a potential administrator we had to think about how to exploit our next step.

## **What of the rest of the congregation?**

The challenge was to find out about what other people might offer to the process of a local ministry team. But we were very conscious that we were not about filling jobs. Of course there are issues. If the manifesto said that the priest was not there to do certain things, then who was? Of course we wanted to identify people who would form a Local Ministry team. But what we knew was that God works on the outside of such teams as well as on the inside and we should keep our focus on the development of the whole people of God in this place. The major temptation in all cases was to turn a gift into a job and that would be the saddest of all outcomes.

So the whole congregation were invited to a Gift Day

## **Invitation**

*Dear \_\_\_\_\_,*

*As you probably know, we are exploring the possibility of a Local Ministry Team because it is unlikely we will have a full time vicar when I retire. Janet has been ordained deacon and*

*should be ordained priest next July. Elaine has begun training for ordination too, as an ordained local minister. Mavis and Sandra are exploring the possibility of joining them in the team as Lay ministers for Community Ministry and Administrator respectively, but none will be full-time. We want to know they will be supported by the whole congregation and are not left to struggle on their own. To help do this we have organised a half day to discover each other's gifts and interests in Christian living. Put another way, we seeking to discover what God has given to each of us. It is the ministry of all the Baptised which makes up the Church in this place.*

*We hope you can come on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> Oct. between 10.00 a.m. and 12.30. If you can stay on past 12.30 there will be a 'bring and share' lunch, so bring something to share.*

*It will be a morning where we will use some fun ways to discover our gifts, without too much talk from the front. I think all will enjoy what we have put together as a way of seeing how we can support this emerging team if it goes ahead. I don't want to sound dramatic, but the future of our church may turn out to rest upon how we go forward together. This day is an important ingredient in the final package, so I hope you will make every effort to come.*

*Joe Hasler. (Vicar)*

### **The gift day**

Concurrently with the emphasis on specialised ministries we also organised a morning for the whole congregation. We suggest a process by which we might see who is being called by the church congregation. We created a Parish Morning where the whole congregation can discover some of their gifts and callings, and we make the opportunity for those called to particular ministries to see who might help them do it. Sixteen people attended.

The process involved choosing three gifts spelt out on cards (in this case green cards) that you could identify as your own and talking to others about what you picked and in particular, what you avoided. Then others picked cards for you (Identical cards but red in colour) and we talked about what we could accept or reject. A long time was spent on the implications of the fact that others saw in us gifts we did not recognise ourselves.

People were then asked to look at the six cards they had and consider which ministry arena that these cards pointed them to. These arenas were posted on pillars but rather than go to them they were asked to go to another table with copies of these arenas written on white cards. They were asked to pick the card appropriate to them without showing anyone else. The whole group then placed people under the heading which they thought people belonged. When all were placed, each person was asked to show the arena they thought the coloured cards pointed them to. In some cases there was a co-incidence and in others a difference which then led to the person having to re-negotiate their place. The lunch that followed was full of animated conversation that enabled people to rejoice in the affirmation of themselves as *Gifted* people.

### **Theological Soup**

After several false starts and fumbling our way forward we ended up with a local ministry team who have been accepted by the PCC. The question was, ‘How could God’s gifts to the congregation emerge in a way that those who were led to be part of the Local Ministry Team find their way to it?’ This arose at about the same time as we were developing apprentice style training for both Elaine and Sandra. A proposal about learning areas had been agreed with the appropriate diocesan department, which involved theological input and supervision and mentoring.

I decided that if it was best for me to do mentoring and supervision, at least at the outset, I needed someone else to do input. I called upon Revd David Lloyd who was at the time involved in context based training at Trinity Bristol and a well respected local tutor for STETs.

We decided together that input one to one, or even worse two to one, would expose Elaine and us to some pressure, so it would be best to invite the whole congregation. We did seven modules of three sessions, an hour and a half long. An average of eight people came from the congregation to support Elaine. Over time twelve different people took part. As time went on most came for themselves. The input sessions were at lunchtime over a bowl of soup and the bread and cheese. Thus the sessions became known as *the theological soup*. The formation of this learning community within the parish had a big impact on the discernment of roles in the emerging local ministry team.

What we discovered is if you want a team, and not a supporters club for an ordained local minister, then you need a mentoring programme for every member of the team. If the training priest is the sole focus of the training, others will soon learn to know their place and slip away.

### **OTHER FOLK in the ministry team.**

#### **Alison**

Is a nurse and is committed to our Healing Ministry. She leads healing services and plays a large part in our children's ministry.

#### **Audrey**

Was up for worship leading but has increasing mobility and hearing problems. She still leads morning office and organises the sacristy,

Audrey is very good at voicing the nervousness some of us want to avoid.

### **David**

Used to be a coach driver and is used to giving a guided tour on a coach outing. So he is well suited as a worship leader (He acts as a deacon in the eucharist.) guiding people through an act of worship, punctuating that act of worship with a word about where we have been and where we are going. David hosts the monthly prayer group with his wife Margaret.

### **Elaine**

See above. In more recent days Elaine has been afflicted with a lung disease. Her health is such that she can lead short services in church and at elderly person's homes.

### **Tony**

Tony originally engaged because of his experience as the PCC treasurer. He has gradually taken on worship leading skills, leading the daily office and later acting as a deacon at the Sunday Eucharist. Tony is a chef and is gradually making the journey to the front of house.

### **Margaret**

Margaret joined the Local ministry team having accompanied Elaine on the theological soup aspect of her training. She said she thought she could do funerals. She would need some training but she had been a verger at funerals for nearly 20 years so she had a grasp of what needed to happen. So I made enquiries about her being trained and licensed as a funeral minister. I understand such ministers exist in other parts of the Anglican Communion.

The answer came back that the Bishop was reluctant to set up a range of specialised licensed ministries so she would need to train as a licensed lay minister so that she could do funerals. So we proposed a set of apprentice style theological soups and mentoring targets that were developed around funeral ministry and at the same time met the learning outcomes for reader ministry in the Shaping the Future report. This was a Diocesan pilot and reported to the Ministry Development Department of the Diocese.

Margaret would never have agreed to train for Reader ministry, but having successfully conducted a number of funeral services expanded into the whole range of reader ministry.

In working class communities, Actions speak louder than words. I remember Margaret telling me that on her pre licensing retreat she told the leader, ‘God never spoke to me. He just pushed.’

### **Louise**

Louise is 90. She is of working class German descent and a Roman Catholic. She comes to St. Mary Magdalene Lockleaze because it is near her home and finds the Roman Catholic church in England dominated by Irish and Italian influences. She says that the Church of England is more like the Catholic church in Germany with which she is familiar. She has been coming for years. Louise is described by her friends in our Lockleaze church as a ‘well read’ person, and she is aware of the writings of people like Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, and more. Furthermore she can tell me about a number of feminist theologians I know little or nothing about.

### **Margaret (continued).**

As Elaine’s health got worse Margaret began to wonder if she should be thinking about being ordained. She was wondering if the team and the wider congregation would support such a move. Eventually

she decided to tell me that she wanted to go for it. On the way to her appointment with Morning Prayer, then a supervision session with me, she called on Louise. Louise was very ill and frail. And Margaret was encouraging her because Louise was feeling very low. Louise said to her, 'You should get ordained.' It felt to Margaret as if God had pushed her once more. So Margaret is working out with others how she moves on with this new vocation.

### **Joe (the writer again)**

I had intended to retire but the Archdeacon called a meeting of the incumbents of six housing estate parishes across the north of Bristol. The meeting was to see if there was interest by all to introduce these ideas to all the parishes over a period of three years. There was much interest that soon grew into keenness so I have agreed to stay until I am 70 to work alongside colleagues to achieve this aim. The Bishop has said he would like this to happen and for his officers to offer this to ministry division as a pilot scheme. Who knows? The Northern Ark of Bristol may pilot something really important.

And if we do it will be because we are

- A community of brokenness held together in the hand of God.

Further information on [www.joehasler.co.uk](http://www.joehasler.co.uk)

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## **About the Northern Ark.**

The Northern Ark is a collaboration of six council housing estate parishes forming an arc across the North of Bristol. They are working together to create indigenous ‘Local Ministry Teams’ in each parish with a view to becoming less dependent on imported ‘stipendiary’ clergy. The underlying principle is that mission and ministry is best exercised by those who confidently present the Christian faith to their own working class culture. Secondly it is better for the Church’s ministry to be seen to ‘belong’ to the community, even when challenging it.

The approach was pioneered at St. Mary Magdalene Lockleaze. The apprentice style of training of the Ordinand, Reader, and unlicensed members, was developed with, and approved by, the Revd Malcolm Herbert and Revd Canon Derek Chedzey as the appropriate Bishop’s Officers, as pilot schemes.

This Training approach, known in Bristol as *Go-local*, *Grow-local*, was launched in the diocese on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2010.

Anticipating this launch, the Archdeacon of Bristol called a meeting of the incumbents of the Northern Ark parishes on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 2010 to explore the possibility of collaboration of the Northern Ark initiative by using the *Go-local* scheme. A proposal was developed for the Archdeacon.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2011 the Bishop of Bristol approved the initiative, initially for a three year period, with a review to begin after 2 years to assess its future potential. He seeks to offer this as a pilot to the Ministry Division