

# **Trusting Indigenous Ministry.**

- A biblical consideration

**David Lloyd**

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### **Trusting the Holy Spirit**

In 1943 the newly ordained Revd. Merfyn Temple risked the mid war Atlantic crossing bound for the then Northern Rhodesia and life as a missionary. During the next three decades in which he worked tirelessly for the sake of the Gospel and the people of that far away land he befriended, supported and sheltered - sometimes at no small cost to himself - Kenneth Kaunda, the man who would emerge as the first indigenous President of independent Zambia.

Such was President Kaunda's trust in Temple that he gave him a key role in the new government and counted him central to his plans for the development of his country and his people.

Yet in 1974 Temple stunned Kaunda and all Zambia by announcing his intention to, in his words, 'pull up his tent pegs' and return to the UK; not because he felt any less passionate about his adopted home, or because the need for Christian ministry was no longer there, rather because he saw clearly that the task of ministry properly, indeed solely, belonged to the indigenous Church.

President Kaunda and many others sought to dissuade him from his decision, yet he remained sure and expressed his belief most clearly in a letter to the Jackson Mwape, President of the United Church of Zambia where he wrote,

‘ I have come to share the view of many that we have now reached the stage in world mission when priority must be given to the local church to become God’s instrument of mission...

... It is my concern that Zambians and expatriate ministers should find a way together of stating in quite unequivocal terms that the Holy Spirit can be trusted and that the local church is ready for mission. ‘<sup>1</sup>

I can claim no greater advocate for the Northern Ark initiative than the spirit of Merfyn Temple who died in January 2012.<sup>2</sup> The Northern Ark initiative stems from a long (22 years) personal engagement as an ordained minister in the Anglican Church whose service has been among people and in places that have traditionally relied on non-indigenous clergy to serve them in their parishes.

I have come to believe that this model no longer serves our mission to the places such as those where I have been called to serve and moreover does not serve the demands of the promises and purposes of God that are to be found in scripture, in the person of Jesus Christ and in the narrative of the people of God.

The Northern Ark initiative is *a* response to our Bristol Diocesan strategy ‘Releasing the Energy’. It is not presented as the only way in which the call to discipleship and Christian ministry may be enacted in our communities, but it is presented as a way to enact the promises of God in our predominantly white, working class, outer estate communities.

The question asked by Merfyn Temple is as appropriate for us in the Northern Ark as it was for Zambia, are we willing to believe and trust that the Holy Spirit of God can and does call people from our context into ministry?

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Merfyn Temple: maverick missionary: practical dreamer’ Volume One: ‘Zambia Stole My Heart’. Millipede Books, 2010 p. 201

<sup>2</sup> CF Obituary <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2012/mar/27/the-rev-merfyn-temple-obituary>. Temple was also an epic cyclist, a further affinity I would claim with him!

For my part I have no doubt about the answer to this challenge.

I fully accept and understand that this has not always been a guiding principle for the institution in which I work and to which I am wholly committed. Patterns of discernment, selection, preparation and training for ministry have traditionally favoured people from a highly selective section of the population, with a strong tendency towards those from middle-class, suburban, educated, managerial / professional contexts.

It should be stressed that the Northern Ark initiative in no way seeks to contest the virtue of all those who have been called, selected and serve faithfully out of that particular and contingent context.

Rather it is an urgent attempt to articulate and enable the vocational call that emerges from our own context in order that the mission of the Church may be fulfilled within and through these communities.

For some this may appear to be nothing less than a long overdue restoration of justice and righteousness of the kind that we find in the prophetic witness of the Old Testament, and it is true that the Northern Ark initiative owes something to a liberative and restorative understanding of God's ways with the world. Nevertheless to believe that the demands of Old Testament justice alone form the foundations of the initiative would lead to an incomplete understanding of the initiative which has its roots in far richer soil, namely the way God repeatedly acts throughout history.

My suggestion and it is not presented lightly or without serious thought, is this. The positive, liberating and enabling acts that God gives to the voice(s) that emerge from contexts of disadvantage are fundamentally constant to the nature of God.

When Walter Brueggemann invites us to consider the narratives of the Old Testament he invites us to contemplate the oldest record we have of the 'truth that is beyond us', namely the voice of YHWH God. In Brueggemann's ceaseless inquiry I find the role of the 'other', the importance of the stranger, the centrality of a theology of 'gift' and the demand for the people of God to journey away from what I have termed the politics of anxiety to be constants.

Each of these may be found in the witness of both Testaments and supremely in the life and work of Jesus Christ and are, as I suggest, paradigmatic by virtue of their constant appearance and re-appearance *from the very beginning*.

The Deuteronomic record is, as many attest, the earliest account we have of the relationship between this God, YHWH, and humanity, and whilst respecting the knowledge that in this record we are presented with stories that have been worked and re-worked throughout time, nevertheless through them we are given access to stories that reveal God's purposes that are often surprising and which occur time and again throughout the narrative of the people of God.

One of the earliest stories we may consider is the account of the selection of leaders by Moses in Numbers chapters 10 and 11.

In chapter 10

<sup>29</sup> *Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel."*

<sup>30</sup> *He answered, "No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people. "*

<sup>31</sup> But Moses said, "Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. <sup>32</sup> If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us. "

<sup>33</sup> So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and travelled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. <sup>34</sup> The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

And in chapter 11

<sup>16</sup> The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. <sup>17</sup> I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.

<sup>18</sup> "Tell the people: 'Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow, when you will eat meat. The LORD heard you when you wailed, "If only we had meat to eat! We were better off in Egypt!" Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. <sup>19</sup> You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, <sup>20</sup> but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it —because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"'"

<sup>21</sup> But Moses said, "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' <sup>22</sup> Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?"

<sup>23</sup> The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you. "

<sup>24</sup> So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied —but did not do so again.

<sup>26</sup> However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. <sup>27</sup> A young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

<sup>28</sup> Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, “Moses, my lord, stop them!”

<sup>29</sup> But Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” <sup>30</sup> Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Whilst space precludes a detailed examination of the narrative we may note that the role of the seventy selected - a story that finds a parallel in the life of the early church in the selection of the seven deacons in Acts – God is keen to show that the call to leadership through the gift of the Spirit cannot be prescribed by human agency.

So Moses implores his brother-in-law Hobab, a *Midianite*, to be their guide, indeed to ‘be our eyes’ in a strange land; so we find the strange yet not unrelated story of Eldad and Medad who whilst among the initial seventy selected appear to be the only two who are permanently stirred and recognised to be conducting spirit enabled ministries among the people. This minority (*these people?*)

phenomenon taxes the patience of Joshua who implores Moses to make them stop! Moses sees things differently.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the disciples of Jesus will be vexed by such things in their day, and the experience and witness to the Spirit in the house of Cornelius will challenge the post-resurrection Apostles, Moses companions are challenged indeed threatened by the indiscriminate and to some extent inscrutable gifts of God.

The response of the 'authorised' leaders appears to be a repeated pattern to suppress such unauthorised ministries. Yet by whom are they 'unauthorised'? Not it seems by the spirit of God but rather by the limitations of human imagination.

The role of the stranger, or outsider, in the purposes of God surfaces again in the story of Ruth where, if we cross reference with careful attention to the bigger picture we find a Moabite woman repeating the voice of Moses in the Numbers story as she claims the blessings of God Moses has articulated for strangers who understand the nature of YHWH God. (So too we might look at the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John and many others too numerous to mention here.)

In drawing attention to this constant behaviour I wish to draw attention to the reality that for much of its history the Church of England has regarded those from certain contexts, such as that of the Northern Ark as strangers to its purposes in ministry and not as those on whom the Spirit of God may alight. Yet we are called to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and from the known towards that which is other. It is an arduous journey, to be sure, for we know that the same limits of the human imagination that we find throughout the Old and New Testaments have long been at work in the history of our Church.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf Numbers 10:31 ff and 11:26 ff NIV translation of The Holy Bible



## **Departing the Politics of Anxiety** - There isn't enough ....aka There's no one left...

The People of God are used to scarcity. The Genesis narratives, especially the understudied Genesis 47 particularly challenges notions of scarcity and sufficiency.

Exodus, Ruth, Elijah and Elisha, describe human need in material terms. Esther, Job and the whole of the Exilic experience but principally in the Jeremiah/ Isaiah/ Ezekiel cycle witness to spiritual poverty and the very real threat of extinction.

We are no strangers to want, in all its forms, yet what these narratives reveal is the pattern of plenty and the grace of God as gift, if we know where and how to look. Time and again we are called to see how this YHWH God is willing to meet needs physical and spiritual if only the People of God will know and trust where to look.

Samuel Wells invites us to believe that at all times and in all places God gives his people all that they *need* to be Church, but reminds us that this may not, in all probability will not, be what the Church *wants* in order to believe that it can be the Church. So just as Israel in the wilderness longed for the imaginary melons and cucumbers of Egypt so the Church in a time of perceived dearth longs for the right kind of administrators, musicians, youth workers that will guarantee the return to the church that never was.<sup>4</sup>

Again, as the pattern of Genesis 47 reveals, it is *only* when God's people embrace the alternative narrative of a departure from the politics of anxiety that they find release and sufficiency. The deep and unrelenting irony of this passage lies in the paradox that it is of all people Joseph, the very one who has cause to have experienced God's blessings in saving his life *and* freeing him from prison, who is incapable of escaping the clutches of imperial anxiety over

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<sup>4</sup> Especially CF Samuel Wells: *God's Companions*. Blackwell 2008

sufficiency and chooses to provide continued enslavement for God's people rather than the abundance that is in his gift.

I am indebted to Revd. Dr. David Holgate for reminding me that God sometimes challenges such perceptions with abundance of almost comical proportions – viz the surfeit of quails for miles around to a depth of several metres – far, far more than was bargained for, provided by God once *and only* the people have departed the politics of anxiety in Egypt.

For me, this and similar accounts of abundance, are typical of the nature of YHWH God's response to our need, and so are to be taken as common expectations for our longing in terms of ministers. There is perhaps too much of the Elijah about us when we fear there are too few to fulfil the task.

(In 1 Kings 19 God reminds his prophet there are several thousand faithful left, and just over the page in 2 Kings we discover that there were at least 50 prophets in Jericho alone! Perhaps Elijah was looking the wrong way?)

In similar vein we hear Paul, himself no mean discerner of vocations, bemoaning the fact that he is under resourced in terms of personnel (CF 2 Timothy, 'Demas has gone, Crescens has gone, Titus has gone' etc, etc...)

It seems to me no coincidence that especially in this time of need and uncertainty about the future of ministry God has met our anxieties with what might appear an over provision, certainly in the response of the 38 -so far - people of our parishes who have offered themselves as members of local learning communities out of which, experience has shown, ministries will emerge. It should be noted that this number represents only four of the six parishes represented by the Northern Ark, with the other two eager and waiting to join the initiative when circumstances allow, and that significantly this

includes a second group of people from Lockleaze; were we to count the group of which Elaine Mills and Margaret Staynings were a part the number would be significantly higher.

God's **abundant** response to our prayers has certainly challenged the leadership group that has been meeting regularly each week to continue to respond by continuing to work with the learning communities in the various parishes, to develop our own skills as Interventionists and Interpreters, and to plan for future provision in order that the Northern Ark programme may continue to develop and fulfil the vision of 'Releasing the Energy' to which we have responded by seeking to enact the promises and to claim the blessings YHWH God has ever offered his pilgrim people.

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## **About the Northern Ark.**

The Northern Ark is a collaboration of six council housing estate parishes in 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