

1. Accidental beginnings lead to core issues.

After Easter 2005, on Low Sunday, we had the Annual Parochial Church Meeting. I left the parish for my holiday home in Weston Super Mare for my sabbatical. The parish I left was of mainly council built homes and its population largely white working class. Janet, a member of the congregation, was training as a Self Supporting Minister. At that time it was hoped that Janet's health would improve so that she would take an active ministry from the parish church. As it happens, her ministry looks as if it will be a fresh expression of ministry that will be exercised from her home. The Normal Sunday attendance at the church in Lockleaze Bristol is about 37 adults and 5 children.

I spent most of the sabbatical landscaping the garden and writing a number of essays about mission and culture from a working class, housing estate ministry perspective. These were eventually developed and published as a book, *Crying out for a Polycentric Church*, (see publications page,) The book followed on from my earlier, *Mind, Body and Estates*. I came to the conclusion that ministry in Lockleaze needed to be culturally appropriate and preferably indigenous. The role of a paid person like me was needed to encourage this ministry rather than to do it. All this was fine talk, little did I expect the opportunity to do it would soon arrive.

On returning from my sabbatical I met with most of the Standing Committee individually. I also spoke with Janet and another, which meant that I spoke to 7 people. I decided to outline two of the things I had discovered during my sabbatical that were of concern and didn't use long words like *enculturation*.

The first was that over the last 10 years, the four largest congregations in our Deanery were on average losing 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. This did not provoke a great deal of response, and what response there was, was varied.

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 10years, what will their capacity to contribute to our costs be in another 10years? This did provoke a response. 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 (from 2006), it was considered by most of the standing committee that they had been lucky with having my appointment and did not expect the attention of a full time stipendiary priest when I retire.

During my first conversation we 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. Off the top of my head 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. 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. Beside I didn't know who we had who could be put forward. So when I said this to the first of the seven people, posing the question of who we could put forward to be ordained, not really expecting an answer, she said, 'What about Elaine?' So I built this question into the next six conversations.

Of the seven people, **five** named Elaine as their first choice, and **one** their second choice. The seventh person who couldn't think of anybody was Elaine herself. There were different degrees of enthusiasm in the responses. 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 that they felt Elaine had that 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 are for her future ministry. She agreed to explore what God was calling her to be. This may have been a call to the priesthood, or it may be to some other ministry. What emerged was that if her call were to the priesthood she would want to be part of a team and not a lone vicar. The fact that Janet was to be ordained as deacon in July 2006 and as priest July 2007 meant she would not be alone. Yet

both Janet's and Elaine's exploration would be best undertaken as part of the congregation 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 asked to explore what we thought it meant 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 a future priest should be like. This is 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.

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