

B. Where we are with Worship

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Worship is at the heart of the Christian life. It renews our encounter with God, and deepens our relationship with Him; it heightens our awareness of the presence of God; it raises our expectation regarding the action and promises, of God: and it awakens new levels of response in us to the call of God. William Temple summed it up in these words:

“Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. it is the quickening of the conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose – and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin.”

Leading Worship is therefore a very responsible task, and traditionally it has been performed almost exclusively by the ordained clergy. They were trained both to conduct the liturgy of Morning and Evening Prayer, to preside at the Eucharist, and to preach the word of God to the assembly of God’s people. In the last century, this task has been partly shared with Readers who have received appropriate training and have been licensed by the Bishop to exercise this responsibility. Worship has also been an activity mainly associated with Sunday – that was the day chosen by the first generation of Christians as marking the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It has been the Church’s ‘holy day’ for two thousand years, and was regarded as a day of rest and recreation by all societies which adopted the Christian Faith. But more recently that pattern has been changing. Four out of ten people now work on a Sunday; shops and sports activities are in full swing and many families see it as a ‘catch up’ day before a new working week begins. This has meant that patterns of worship have had to diversify in order to cater for those who are not free to worship on Sundays but might do so on a weekday.

The other factor that has affected the conduct of worship is the increasing shortage of ordained clergy. This has been particularly noticeable in rural parishes where one priest might be responsible for say five or more churches. S/he cannot possibly lead worship in all five every Sunday and so alternative leadership has to be found. Sometimes there are Readers to take the lead, but increasingly even they are too thin on the ground to fill all the ‘gaps’ left by the clergy. This raises two issues.

1. If Clergy are not present what kind of service might be most appropriate?
2. If Clergy or Readers are not available, who else might lead worship?

1913 and all that....

One hundred years ago Bishop Charles Gore stated the ideal of Sunday worship in these words: 'The Lord's' supper in the Lord's house on the Lord's day with the Lord's people,' In short, Holy Communion in every church every Sunday. That became the inspiration for the Parish and People movement which swept across the Church of England in the 1930's and 1940's. The result was that Parish Communion became the central act of worship on Sunday mornings in most parish churches. There was still Evensong later in the day but that disappeared very quickly with the advent of television and cars. So in the post-war years the Parish Communion became the only service available in the majority of churches, and probably that remains true to this day.

2013 and all change?

Making Parish Communion the main service has meant a number of things. First, it has distorted the genius of the Anglican tradition which had always maintained a healthy balance between Services of the Word (not involving Holy Communion) and Services of the Sacrament (involving the celebration of Holy Communion). Second, it has made the leadership of worship the almost exclusive preserve of the ordained clergy. Only a priest may celebrate Holy Communion because lay presidency is not permitted by the canons of the Church of England, even though it has been debated a number of times in General Synod (See Eucharistic Presidency GS1248). Sometimes churches have resorted to the practice of Communion by extension but such a form of liturgy often feels second best and an 'emergency measure'.

Third, concentration on Parish Communion has discouraged people seeking faith or young in faith from taking part in public worship. Communion is essentially a service of the 'committed' and does not suit those still exploring their relationship with God. The popularity of All-age (Family) services in recent years has highlighted the previous lack of any alternative liturgy in the Church's pattern of worship.

Change is therefore essential. We need to restore the balance between Services of the Word and Services of the Sacrament. We need to open up leadership of worship to those who are not ordained. We need to offer alternative forms of worship which might appeal to people who simply want to make a tentative link with Christian worship at this point in their lives. (Of course this is dealing with a 'Come to us' Style of church – rather than 'Go to them'; but Fresh Expressions is a different subject.)

Restoring the balance in our worship requires a renewed appreciation of the value of Services of the word. If the essence of worship is an encounter with God then it is that which should be the criterion of what happens in church, not whether we received bread and wine at the altar.

Opening up leadership of worship may mean more than simply re-affirming the role of Readers in our local churches, though that is an important work. We need to ask if others who have not had the same degree of training might be given sufficient understanding and skill to lead God's people in the liturgy. The question of preaching will also need to be part of this discussion, though the two roles do not always belong together. Also it might be possible for materials to be supplied which would form the basis of a weekly sermon or homily, requiring in the main effective delivery from the local leader.

Alternative forms of worship which might appeal to people on the fringes of the church might well go beyond the offer of Morning or Evening Prayer. It might mean All-age worship or Messy church or Café church or perhaps liturgy from Taize or Iona. A huge range of materials now exists and we are the poorer for not exploring them and experimenting with them in our Sunday or weekday worship.

Many congregations in the Lichfield Diocese will recognize the changes that have just been described not as an urgent need but as a present reality. The shortage of ordained clergy has already hit home to them and they are familiar with different individuals standing at the front of church to conduct their services. Sometimes such people are licensed Readers but on other occasions they have assumed a more ad hoc responsibility at the request of the incumbent quite simply because no one else has been available and the alternative would have been cancellation of worship.

The outcome of this situation is often confusion and uncertainty. Who has the right to lead worship? Who should be allowed to preach? How come some people need the Bishop's licence to exercise different forms of leadership whilst others seem to need no such permission? Are we just being left to our own devices so that all previous rulings and regulations can happily be ignored? How can standards be maintained if people without any formal training are stepping up to conduct services and maybe even deliver sermons? What alternative might there be to this present situation?

The ADAP model

The Bishop of Lichfield has outlined one possible way forward which came from his experience of visiting France as a young priest. The French Diocese of Arras, faced with a serious shortage of priests, developed "Assemblée Dominicale en L'absence de pretres" (ADAP), "Sunday services without priests." The Bishop comments: 'In practice what that meant was a worship committee for each parish. They met mid-week, prayed and worshipped together, studied the scripture reading for the next Sunday and guided by an "animateur" or "animatrice" they put together a service with several people contributing what they could.'

Such an approach took seriously the New Testament teaching about the church as the Body of Christ and the fact God has equipped different members of that Body with various gifts and ministries which when exercised sensitively and lovingly together lead the church towards greater maturity in Christ. The Bishop's main

suggestion for who might fulfil the role of the animateur/animatrice was the local Reader or perhaps the local clergyperson. If that is impossible then someone who has that kind of gift – the ability to facilitate and co-ordinate – should be invited by the group to take the lead. The group would in most places be self-selecting as only a limited number of people would feel the inclination or have the time to get involved in such an activity. However, in all cases any such group would be accountable to the incumbent, and should the parish be in vacancy to the P.C.C (or, if necessary, the Rural/Area Dean).

The pack of materials which follows aims to provide resources to help an “ADAP” group take the first steps towards responsibility for Sunday worship. There are 6 sessions. Some are designed to encourage and equip lay people develop their gifts and skills in preparing and leading public worship. Other sessions aim to increase an understanding of some of the principles of facilitating worship – including Communion by extension. Session 3 offers help in taking in the exciting possibility of proclaiming the good news in preaching and/or teaching. Each group can use whichever sessions are relevant to their own context and ministry and work through them as a group or maybe as an individual under the supervision of a mentor. Hopefully, but not necessarily, this will motivate members of the ADAP to pursue further study and obtain more permanent forms of authorisation for ministry in their local church.

Mediocrity

We cannot offer God what is mediocre for God deserves to receive the best both in the offering of our worship and our lives. However, as Charles de Foucauld pointed out one of the marks of mediocrity can be “lack of risk”. The Christian life is often more like an uncharted adventure than a planned expedition. We often step out towards the unknown only aware that we do so in obedience to God’s call and the comfort of His companionship. Forming an ADAP group and beginning to take responsibility for worship, and maybe even preaching, could well feel like a risk, and we might feel apprehensive about it. That is one reason these materials have been produced – to help boost your confidence.

But in addition to this pack you also have the support of your Diocesan Bishop. He has said that starting in September 2013 for a period of two years he is willing to allow a period of experimentation in the Diocese of Lichfield. Experimentation which will give groups of lay people the freedom to explore the formation of ADAP groups, and to take some responsibility for worship and teaching in the local church. This will mean that the normal regulations which control the selection of worship leaders will be suspended so that they do not hinder new ideas and new initiatives. He hopes that this will be seen as an invitation for lay people to recognize the challenge which face us at the present time and to rise to that challenge by offering their time and talent to help maintain and enrich the worship and teaching available in their local church.

So now it's over to you. Whatever the present situation in your parish with regard to the leadership of worship and the teaching of the Gospel here is an opportunity for more people to share and enjoy the responsibility. The next 2 years could offer us a unique opportunity to make decisive progress in resourcing the church's ministry and mission in the completely new climate that is appearing in the Church of England. Let's be sure that we make the very most of it.

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