

Context: For a variety of reasons, the Diocese of Winchester has been relatively slower than other dioceses in creating rural benefices with over four parishes. It is only within the last few years that pastoral reorganisation here has created combinations of up to 11 parishes/churches.

The First Story: told by Peter Dyson (incumbent) & Jane Leese (NSM House for Duty [HfD]), our hosts for the day.

The 'extended benefice of Herriard' was created from two previous benefices, one a united parish, with Peter as first incumbent, Jane HfD, and another HfD who is in employment. This was not so much planned, but 'came to be'. There is significance also in some parishes being in relationship with Odiham, the adjacent town of 6000, and others wishing to avoid linking with Old Basing, near Basingstoke. The new extended benefice is in covenant to work with the parish of Odiham. Some parishes still feel 'tagged on', despite 20 years of being in a multi-parish benefice. The priests have defined pastoral responsibility for their particular parishes. The benefice has identified four ways of serving Christ through liturgy and mission: (i) accepting that most people do not move to worship in another church; (ii) keeping all 12 churches open — a theological commitment; (iii) offering regular worship in every church every Sunday — taking lay leadership of services very seriously; (iv) giving each church a pastoral link with one of the clergy.

Summary of Comments made in Discussion

- *structures*: inter-PCC cooperation is low in this extended benefice — there is rivalry. On another benefice: 'It felt like a huge edifice'; the way forward is not to have three levels of committees, but something more dynamic. Some archdeacons do not understand the issues.
- *history*: multi-parish benefices were presented as an exciting opportunity in 70s-early 80s and there was a big input of diocesan training, which has now fizzled out. Now there is no contextual support and the tension is carried by the clergy. Every village is completely different. Does previous occupation affect clergy ministry?
- *services*: centrality of communion (Parish & People) probably a mistake, especially in rural areas. Popularity of evening or early evening services.
- *lay ministry*: is the best practice for lay worship leaders to lead services in the parish where they live or elsewhere? Present diocesan consultation papers have an accent on lay-training. License to area rather than parish? Readers are concerned — six weeks' training to lead worship? Relationship between ministry and presence of church building and Christian people in a village.
- *redundancy*: has anyone tried closing churches? The threat often energises the parishioners into building community.

The Second Story: told by Tony Pears, incumbent of the Northanger Benefice

Coming from the catholic tradition, Tony is asking what it means to be a priest in his newly constituted benefice, formed out of three existing benefices, with support from retired clergy. There is too much complexity is task. He offered a diagram of his new benefice similar to that on p396 of *Faith in the Countryside*. Superimposing the Rubilev Trinity icon, he suggested that both are constituted by the dance of relationship, the *perichoresis* of the Trinity. So what is the role of priest? He wanted to be a George Herbert, but reality stood against it. Many people's relationship with God, he discovered, depended on the parish priest. A parishioner complained in a letter about his leaving off the name of the priest conducting each service, "we don't know who the babysitter is going to be." The best attended service is a completely lay-led Family Service. Calling in a priest for pastoral care is an indictment of the Christian community in that place. Sunday services are most important in resourcing the community. Tony hopes to release busy Christians and nourish them through quality services. His role, he believes, is to identify those in the benefice who are able to lead worship. He does not chair any PCCs. "Taking the authority I have been given and giving it away has been very scary." Tony controls the rota, with no one person identified with any church: long-term it is not helpful to build up personal dependency. All this is very much 'work in progress'. There is an opportunity for a HfD priest, but Tony would rather a HfD Youth Worker — but many want to see a collar.

Summary of Comments made in Discussion

- *training*: in rural benefices, people back away from the diocesan Lay Pastor Scheme.
- *clergy*: stole the notion of dependence on God and have created dependency: it is lovely to be needed as vicar, but the village has a Christian community whose ministry includes pastoral care. Funerals are important in discovering the story of the place. The prayerfulness of lay people is challenging to clergy. There is an element of victimisation of clergy by lay people. If people are being energised, how much are we (clergy) misusing it?
- *busyness*: an endemic disease in Hampshire. The opposite is unhurried reflectiveness: Jesus being

available at the well. Urban clergy allege they are hijacked by interventions. For rural clergy, the day is open to settle your day, negotiated with people. 'I want to say to people, "I'm not busy".' Some villages are empty during the daytime.

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□ *institutional demands*: each parish an administrative entity. Does this have to be? General Synod and diocese are silent when asked to lighten this load.

Benefice as Family, Ian Tomlinson

Ian outlined his journey to this idea, through pastoral care and counselling and Grubb Institute consultations. A benefice is a dysfunctional family acting out its family life. Grubb consultations suggested that churchmanship made hardly any difference: all were managing the anxiety of the CofE on behalf of the bishop. We do need as much help as we can get on how to do the job, eg the newly published 'Vicar's Guide'. But unless we attend to the hidden unconscious processes, ministry will not be sustainable. Ian gave an example of a 'critical incident', (cf the 'babysitter' comment above) an encounter where there is criticism out of proportion to the fault, which yet reveals depths of meaning about roles and personal history. The new reality of men and women working together in the clergy needs more careful attention than it has so far been given. He advocates a systems approach, sensitive to context, holding activities within the boundary: the aim is to take on a role appropriate for the task. Much trouble comes from confusing role and person. Each parish represents a child in the family, each is different: the difficulty of being scrupulously fair to one's children. Diocese promotes administrative model of benefice, with an administrator. Better to understand benefice as organic, with lots of permeable boundaries between each member. As with your family, need to hold the benefice in your mind, heart and prayers. Wesley Carr suggests the practical question always is: what is happening in me and why? We need to take responsibility for our own reactions. Theological and personal reflection go hand in hand.

Final Reflections by Martin Coppen

The day raised many useful questions about benefices of all sizes, implying that there may be changes in the challenge as benefices grow larger. Most pertinently, there was concern about the dynamics of relationships between and within constituent parishes and across them. No-one advocated a management model. There was agreement about the need for training lay worship leaders — but how will clergy and readers feel? All speakers suggested that skills of very attentive awareness both to visible and invisible, unconscious processes are needed by benefice clergy particularly. Issues about authority persist. There are tensions between institutional demands, which may be met by administrative means, and priestly ministry to the benefice family, holding members far enough apart for them to work together. These tensions live within the clergy. With each village being a distinct individual through its history and composition, rural ministry demands a reflectiveness and sensitivity to difference and possibility, supported by serious diocesan training input. Rural ministerial training has almost completely been left by this diocese to the excellent, though distant Arthur Rank Centre. There are also questions about what spirituality best sustains this demanding ministry.

Meeting at Long Sutton Village Hall, Wednesday 13th October 2005